University of Alberta

Tidy Minds and Untidy Lives: The Intertextual Relationship between Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* and the Novels of Jane Austen and Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë.

by

Joanna Rachel Denford ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1997

National Library of Canada
Acquisitions and Bibliographic Services
395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale du Canada
Acquisitions et services bibliographiques
395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-22523-2

Canada

University of Alberta

Library Release Form

Name of Author: Joanna Rachel Denford

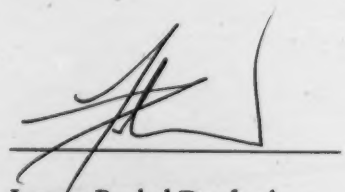
Title of Thesis: Tidy Minds and Untidy Lives: The Intertextual Relationship between Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* and the Novels of Jane Austen and Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë.

Degree: Master of Arts

Year this Degree Granted: 1997

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Library to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly, or scientific research purposes only.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis, and except as hereinbefore provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatever without the author's prior written permission.



Joanna Rachel Denford
507-11005 98 Ave NW
Edmonton AB
T5K 0C9

October 2, 1997

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Tidy Minds and Untidy Lives: The Intertextual Relationship between Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* and the novels of Jane Austen and Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë" in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Dr. J. McMaster

Dr. E. Bishop

Dr. C. Varnhagen

Abstract

"Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery," a quotation from Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, reads the epigraph of Stella Gibbons' parodic novel, *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). The choice of this quotation and the inclusion of many other references throughout the novel to the works of both Austen and Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë, reflect Gibbons' familiarity with and admiration for these novels. More importantly, the presence of these references establishes an intertextual relationship between Gibbons' work and that of her literary predecessors which imbues these works with new depths of meaning. This thesis will first establish the context of the novel by briefly examining the author and her other works, and exploring the principal objects of Gibbons' parody, the novels of Thomas Hardy, Mary Webb, Sheila Kaye-Smith, and D.H. Lawrence. Most of the thesis will be devoted to examining the correlations in motifs, characters, themes, and plots between *Cold Comfort Farm* and the works of Austen and the Brontës which define their intertextual relationship. Finally, the results of this investigation will be synthesized to provide an explication of Gibbons' intentions in both using and undermining the elements which characterize the novels of her predecessors in her parodic exploration of her literary heritage.

Table of Contents

Introduction	"Collecting Material"	1
Chapter 1	"A Tidy Mind": Flora Poste as an Austenian Heroine	17
Chapter 2	"Untidy Lives": The World of *Cold Comfort Farm* as a Brontëan Novel	40
Chapter 3	"The Most Revolting Florence Nightingale Complex": Interpretations of Gibbons' Intentions	62
Conclusion	"Mr. Mybug": The Irony of Scholarship	78
Works Cited and Consulted		79

List of Abbreviations

CCF	*Cold Comfort Farm*	Stella Gibbons
E	*Emma*	Jane Austen
JE	*Jane Eyre*	Charlotte Brontë
Life	*The Life of Charlotte Brontë*	Elizabeth Gaskell
MP	*Mansfield Park*	Jane Austen
NA	*Northanger Abbey*	Jane Austen
P	*Persuasion*	Jane Austen
PP	*Pride and Prejudice*	Jane Austen
S	*Shirley*	Charlotte Brontë
SS	*Sense and Sensibility*	Jane Austen
TWH	*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*	Anne Brontë
WH	*Wuthering Heights*	Emily Brontë

Introduction: "Collecting Material"

> "...I am sure it would be more amusing to go and stay with some of these dire relatives. Besides, there is sure to be a lot of material I can collect for my novel; and perhaps one or two of the relations will have messes or miseries in their domestic circle which I can clear up."
>
> "You have the most revolting Florence Nightingale complex," said Mrs. Smiling.
>
> "It is not that at all, and well you know it. On the whole I dislike my fellow-beings; I find them so difficult to understand. But I have a tidy mind, and untidy lives irritate me. Also, they are uncivilized." (*CCF*, 21)

What would happen if you took one of Jane Austen's heroines and dropped her into one of the novels of Charlotte, Emily, or Anne Brontë? This question has a number of potential answers, if you are willing to take the imaginative leap of faith that such a question requires. First of all, you would get a novel that is familiar in occasionally undefinable ways, and is yet, at the same time, strange and new. You would undoubtedly get a lot of humour, resulting from the incongruity of pairing two very disparate ways of regarding life and literature, and a pointed commentary on the literary conventions of their chosen genre. In addition, you would get the literary battle of the century, a chance for Austen and the Brontës, whose very styles are almost antithetically opposed to each other, to battle for supremacy. And, though this final response may not leap to many readers' minds, and it still remains for me to prove in the pages that follow, you would also get Stella Gibbons' comic novel, *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932).

In order to be able to recognize the intertextual relationship between Austen, the Brontës, and *Cold Comfort Farm*, I must first address the novel's context, an exercise which will help determine which specific aspects of the novel are expressions of this relationship, and which are manifestations of others of Gibbons' intentions. In its simplest incarnation, *Cold Comfort Farm* is the story of Flora Poste, a calm, collected, and coolly intelligent heroine who, because of her parents' deaths, has been forced to throw herself—albeit gracefully and without embarrassment—upon the charity of her relatives, the Starkadders. Finding herself in the midst of people "who lead rich emotional lives and who (as the saying is) live intensely and with a wild poetry" (*CCF*, 134), Flora sets about tidying up life at the aptly named Cold Comfort Farm. In her quest for order, Flora is opposed by the peculiar inhabitants of her new home: Amos, called by God to preach about hell-fire to the Church of the Quivering Brethren; Judith, racked with guilt for her love of an unworthy son; Seth, aflame with desire for Hollywood, and anathema to maidens' virtues when the sukebind is in flower; and the matriarch of the Starkadders, Aunt Ada Doom, who once saw "something nasty in the woodshed" (*CCF*, 113).

The author of this fantastic novel, Stella Gibbons, was born in 1902 to Maud Williams and Dr. Telford Charles Gibbons, and was raised with her younger brothers in North London. She was educated by governesses at home until she turned thirteen, at which time she was enrolled at North London Collegiate School for Girls. At the age of nineteen, Gibbons embarked on a two-year program in Journalism at University College, London, which led to her ten years' of experience in "the meaningless and vulgar bustle of newspaper offices" (*CCF*, 7), working for the British United Press, the

Evening Standard, and *The Lady*. In 1933, she married actor Allan Bourne Webb, with whom she had one daughter. She died in 1989. During the course of her life, Gibbons wrote five volumes of poetry, several collections of short stories, and over twenty novels (*Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, 421).

While Gibbons considered herself to be more a poet than a novelist, it is primarily her prose which is significant to my thesis, as it is this body of work that provides a context for *Cold Comfort Farm*. Her fiction includes both comedy and romance. While her specialty, a tendency presaged by *Cold Comfort Farm*, is portraying the peculiarities of human nature, her novels embrace such disparate topics as bear-hunting (*Fort of the Bear*, 1953), acting (*The Rich House*, 1947), and supernatural possession (*Starlight*, 1967). These novels tend to have several central figures, a tendency which makes for somewhat rambling narrative structures; such is the case, for example, with *Bassett* (1934), in which the action of the novel is divided between the experiences of Hilda Baker, and those of Queenie Catton, two women whose only connection to each other is based on geography. Moreover, the plots of these works often fade away, rather than coming to satisfying conclusions. The characters that populate these novels include several original and interesting figures, but none of them is as vivid and alive as those found in the pages of *Cold Comfort Farm*. This combination of factors leaves the reader with the impression that these novels are pleasant, entertaining, and well-written, if rather odd, but—on the whole—unremarkable.

In contrast to the commonplace style of Gibbons' other works, *Cold Comfort Farm* has been considered something of an instant classic since its publication in 1932,

at which time it was awarded the *Femina Vie Heureuse* Prize for literature; in its strong central character, cohesive structure, and masterful command of the motifs of literature, it is a work very different from the novels that follow it. Indeed, part of the novel's appeal to a student of literature is the fact that it appears to have been an aberration in Gibbons' career, and the popularity of her first novel has no doubt haunted the rest of her literary endeavours. Although the novel is still relatively obscure, it is almost invariably regarded by those who have read it as one of the hidden treasures of English literature, and it has also enjoyed something of a resurgence, including the publication of a new edition from Penguin Books (1994), which has largely been the result of a recent film production by the British Broadcasting Corporation, directed by John Schlesinger and starring Kate Beckinsale, Eileen Atkins, Rufus Sewell, and Ian McKellan.

Much of the appeal of *Cold Comfort Farm* lies in the characters that populate it; while partaking of many of the aspects of the stereotypes they suggest, figures such as Aunt Ada Doom and Reuben Starkadder still manage to be completely original, and more importantly, thoroughly likable. Even in the midst of depicting the peculiarities of the Starkadders, Gibbons never allows the humour to degenerate into a mere burlesque of these oddities; she renders her characters with enough subtlety and imbues them with enough humanity that the reader is torn between rooting for Flora in her attempts to reform her relatives, and hoping that she will fail. In Flora, as well, Gibbons has created a heroine who is capable of both participating in the experiences of her relatives, and—paradoxically—remaining unaffected by them. There is, significantly, no real sense of natural consequences either in Flora or in Gibbons'

narration; the characters, including the heroine, are not required to go through the painful process of maturation, an omission which results in a curiously satisfying experience for the reader, who is not required to share vicariously in the humiliations that are usually so central to character development. In fact, *Cold Comfort Farm* makes no pretense of depicting reality, revelling instead in its own outrageousness with a straight face, and tongue planted firmly in cheek.

While *Cold Comfort Farm* is wildly funny in its own right, even without further knowledge of the author's intentions, it achieves its greatest humour in its context as a parody. The novel provides Gibbons with the opportunity to mock—both pointedly and affectionately—a literary movement from the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, exemplified by the works of such authors as Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence, which focused on rural settings, melodrama, and earthy, sexually charged prose. Mordant, witty, and perfectly ironical, *Cold Comfort Farm* is rendered even richer and more farcical if the reader is familiar with the works being parodied, and each successive reading displays Gibbons' natural genius for the traditional elements of parody—its humour, its narrative style, and its keen commentary on literary types.

The most important aspect of *Cold Comfort Farm*, at least to my investigation, is related to the novel's parodic nature; it is not only a *literary*, but also a highly *literate*, novel. This aspect of Gibbons' style manifests itself through references to and relationships with a number of novels, not only with the primary objects of her parody, but also with the works of Austen and the Brontës, and it is these connections which will be the principal focus of this exploration. In order to clarify my analysis, I

shall first provide definitions of the literary terms which will in turn define these relationships—parody, satire, and intertextuality.

The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics defines parody as a genre in which an author "imitates the distinctive style and thought of a literary text, author, or tradition for comic effect" (881), and outlines some of the more complex issues related to parody as follows:

> Parody is attractive not only for considerations of taste, but also because it is more interesting in the challenges it presents, in its nature as a "meta-fiction" which raises questions about such theoretical issues as the process of writing, the role of the reader, the role of authority, and the social context of the text. Because the success of parody depends not only on the reader's understanding of the text, but also on the recognition of the source-text it is based on and the comical twist or reversal of those cultural values embedded in the source-text, the readerly transaction is complex. (881-82)

Parody can be either affectionate—as is the case with Gibbons' own novel—or harshly critical. One of the techniques that often accompanies parody is satire, which is defined as "a mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule and scorn, [which] is often an incidental element in literary works that may not be wholly satirical, especially in comedy" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 198). In those instances where Gibbons is sending up the themes and motifs of other novels for comic effect, therefore, she is engaging in parody; where her manipulation of these themes and motifs allow her to comment on the limitations of society as a whole, her work becomes satirical.

The problem with a term such as parody is that it is inevitably accompanied by biases which undermine the creativity and originality of one of the texts involved. Where parody is considered to be an instance of imitation and influence, the literary

debt is attributed to the more recent text; parody, therefore, has less literary merit by virtue of the fact that it borrows elements from its object, rather than creating new characters, plot devices, or themes. Conversely, the approach of regarding parody as a manifestation of inspiration or transformation valorizes it over the object of the parody, because the later author has taken traditional elements (where tradition is often equated with stagnation), and created from them something entirely new.

Because I want to avoid the limitations of such terms, I have turned to the concept of intertextuality to define the complex relationships between texts without privileging one at the expense of the others. In its simplest form, intertextuality is defined as follows:

> Intertextuality... designate[s] the various relationships that a given text has with other texts. These intertextual relationships include anagram, allusion, adaptation, translation, parody, pastiche, imitation, and other kinds of transformation. (*Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 112)

At its most comprehensive and abstract, intertextuality has far wider ramifications, suggesting that all literature is interconnected, and that the addition of any new work changes and is changed by everything that has come before, and will in turn change and be changed by everything that follows:

> Texts are fragments, without closure or resolution. No text is self-sufficient; each text is fraught with explicit or invisible quotation marks that dispel the illusion of its autonomy and refer it endlessly to other texts.... [N]o writer can ever be in control of the meaning of the text.... (*New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 621)

As with the implications inherent in the definition of parody, intertextuality recognizes that these works of literature do not exist in a vacuum; texts are connected not merely by the author's conscious or unconscious intentions in using the

intertextual techniques of allusion and quotation, but by our *recognition* of this relationship. As a result, it is possible for all of the texts to which we as readers have been exposed to exist *at the same time* in our minds, and therefore to become commentaries on *each other*.

By evaluating the relationship between Gibbons' parody and the works of Austen and the Brontës according to the tenets of intertextuality, we can recognize the full potential of the parody without undermining the merits of any of the works involved. The relationship between the parody and its objects thereby becomes mutually enriching, both giving additional depth to the text itself through the expectations and associations created by references to these earlier works, and encouraging the reader to join Gibbons in an imaginative misreading of the works that inspired her.

Before I can illustrate the ways in which Gibbons parodies the works of Austen and the Brontës, I must first briefly examine the primary focus of the parody, the earthy, melodramatic rural novels of authors such as Thomas Hardy, Mary Webb, Sheila Kaye-Smith, and D.H. Lawrence. The atmosphere and characters of *Cold Comfort Farm*, even the prose itself, which leans towards the purple, are rich with types and motifs culled from novels like *Precious Bane* and *The Rainbow*. Gibbons obligingly points out to the reader many of the most relevant passages by her ironic use of "the method perfected by the late Herr Baedeker" (*CCF*, 9)—that is, by flagging them with one, two, or three stars; while she professes to be pointing out the best passages for the benefit of critics, those which she chooses invariably have the most in common, stylistically speaking, with the principal objects of her parody.

A significant amount of the precedent for the regional novel, in all its earthiness (both agricultural and otherwise), may be attributed to Thomas Hardy, whose fictional county of Wessex has been imbued with so much detail and atmosphere that it is almost a character in its own right. It is in such novels as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) that many of the motifs of the rural novel are developed, such as the fragility of woman's virtue, the prevalence of having children out of wedlock, the unforgiving nature of the land, and the generally morose tone and tragic or unsatisfying conclusions that are characteristic of such works. When Tess's mother discovers that Tess has been seduced by Alec d'Urberville, her response is " 'Well, we must make the best of it, I suppose. 'Tis nater, after all, and what do please God!' " (70). Such resignation is typical of these agricultural novels, a quality which Gibbons incorporates mockingly into her own work. Upon encountering Meriam, the hired girl, Flora recognizes her as a literary type, "a primitive woman, a creature who was as close to the earth as a bloomy greengage and rather like one to look at and talk to" (*CCF*, 68). When she learns that Meriam is in a state of approaching motherhood for the fourth time, Flora attempts to instruct her in basic birth-control methods, an action that is incompatible with the expectations of the other inhabitants of Cold Comfort Farm, who, as characters typical of agricultural novels, already understand the conventions which Flora seems to be so willing to flout:

> "Aye," agreed her daughter, heavily, " 'tes wickedness. 'Tes flyin' in the face of Nature."
>
> "That's right."
>
> A pause, during which Mrs. Beetle stood with her broom suspended, looking firmly at the oil stove. Then she added:
>
> "All the same, it might be worth tryin'." (*CCF*, 72)

By allowing the characters who belong to this mind-set to see the value of a way of bypassing the whole seduction issue, Gibbons both undermines the motif itself, encouraging her reader to re-assess the appearance of this plot device in Hardy's work and in its successors in a new, farcical light, and provides her characters with the opportunity to outgrow some of the restrictions placed on them by their status as stereotypes.

Mary Webb, the author of *Precious Bane* (1924) and *Gone to Earth* (1917), also had success with the agricultural novel, although her works have not been accepted as part of the literary canon as have Hardy's. Webb's contribution to this genre of novels is a touch of the grotesque in her characterization; while such figures as Hardy's Tess and Angel, even in the midst of their most inexplicable behaviour, could be imagined by the reader as being based on real people, characters like Prudence and Gideon Sarn of *Precious Bane* often seem divorced from humanity by virtue of their oddities, either physical (as in Prue's hair-lip), or mental (as in Gideon's relentless ambition). It is by emulating the peculiarity of characterization practised by Webb that Gibbons achieves some of her most paradoxically original versions of the rural novel's stereotypes; Elfine, for example, is another incarnation of the dryad-like character of Hazel Woodus of *Gone to Earth*, and Elfine's happy fate becomes Gibbons' commentary on what Hazel's future might have been in the hands of a less emotional author. Likewise, Prue's constant warnings of the mysterious forces of destiny affecting the Sarn family—"'The bane!' I whispered. 'The precious bane!' " (161)—have their counterpart in *Cold Comfort Farm*:

> "There's no seeds, Robert Poste's child. That's what I'm tellin' ye. The seeds wither as they fall into the ground, and the earth will not nourish 'em. The cows are barren and the sows are farren and the King's Evil and the Queen's Bane and the Prince's Heritage ravages our crops. 'Cos why? 'Cos there's a curse on us, Robert Poste's child." (*CCF*, 55)

Taken out of their context in *Precious Bane*, and delivered by the rather pathetic figure of Adam Lambsbreath to a disbelieving and only vaguely interested Flora, these warnings become less portentous than comical, as Gibbons sends up yet another traditional element of the agricultural novel, the curse motif.

Sheila Kaye-Smith, author of several novels, including *Sussex Gorse* (1916) and *Joanna Godden* (1921), which belong to the same genre as those of Hardy and Webb, also provided a great deal of material for Gibbons' parody. The focus of her regional novels, the county of Sussex, also acts as the backdrop for the peculiarities of the Starkadders:

> But [Flora] reminded herself that Sussex, when all was said and done, was not quite like other counties, and that when one observed that these people lived on a *farm* in Sussex, the address was no longer remarkable. (*CCF*, 22)

In addition, the character of Reuben Starkadder, almost in its entirety, is both a tribute to and parody of the struggles of the central character—of the same name—of *Sussex Gorse*. A man whose obsession with farming Boarzell Moor, a tract of land which borders on his own farm, destroys all of the people in his life, the character of Reuben Backfield is grimly single-minded in the pursuit of his ambition:

> He kept his body motionless, but in his heart strange things were moving. That hatred which had run through him like a knife just before he lost consciousness in the battle of Boarzell, suddenly revived and stabbed him again. It was no longer without focus, and it was no longer without purpose. Boarzell... the name seemed to dance before him in letters of fire and blood. He was suffering for Boarzell—his

> father had not been robbed, for his father did not care, but he, Reuben, had been robbed—and he had fought for Boarzell on Boarzell, and now he was bearing shame and pain for Boarzell. Somehow he had never till this day, till this moment, been so irrevocably bound to the land he had played on as a child, on which he had driven his father's cattle, which had broken with its crest the sky he gazed on from his little bed. Boarzell was his, and at the same time he hated Boarzell. For some strange reason he hated it as much as those who had taken it from him and as those who were punishing him because of it. He wanted to tame it, as a man tames a bull, with a ring in its nose. (*Sussex Gorse*, 16)

The same mindless determination characterizes Gibbons' own version of the obsessive farmer, but in this case, Reuben Starkadder's obsession finds its outlet in "scranletting," matching the number of chicken feathers to their empty sockets, and "loving the soil with the fierce desire of a lecher" (*CCF*, 217):

> *** The man's big body, etched menacingly against the bleak light that stabbed in from the low windows, did not move. His thoughts swirled like a beck in spate behind the sodden grey furrows of his face. A woman... Blast! Blast! Come to wrest away from him the land whose love fermented in his veins, like slow yeast. She-woman. Young, soft-coloured, insolent. His gaze suddenly edged by a fleshy taint. Break her. Break. Keep and hold and hold fast the land. The land, the iron furrows of frosted earth under the rain-lust, the fecund spears of rain, the swelling, slow burst of seed-sheaths, the slow smell of cows and cry of cows, the trampling bride-path of the bull in his hour. All his, his....
>
> "Will you have some bread and butter?" asked Flora, handing him a cup of tea. "Oh, never mind your boots. Adam can sweep the mud up afterwards. Do come in."
>
> Defeated, Reuben came in. (*CCF*, 77)

By following Reuben's dark and earthy ruminations with such prosaic elements of civilization as bread and butter, Gibbons illuminates for her own readers the excesses of Kaye-Smith's style which occasionally render these literary creations incompatible with reality, and invites them to share in her enjoyment of their stylistic peculiarities.

Of all of the objects of Gibbons' parody, D.H. Lawrence is the one whose examples of this type of earthy novel, such as *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, have

been most fully accepted as part of the canon of English literature, and he is, indeed, the only one of these authors to be mentioned by name in Gibbons' novel. Mr. Mybug, the "genius" whose attentions plague Flora's existence at Cold Comfort Farm, mentions the author in his usual pseudo-intellectual, name-dropping manner of speaking:

> He said that, by God, D.H. Lawrence was right when he had said there must be a dumb, dark, dull, bitter belly-tension between a man and a woman, and how else could this be achieved save in the long monotony of marriage? (*CCF*, 206)

Indeed, in his adoption of the sexual overtones that form such a large part of works like *Women in Love*—in which the author displays an almost obsessive interest in things like fecundity and loins, and sexualizes even a botany lesson, with its " 'red little spiky stigmas of the female flower' " and " 'dangling yellow male catkin, yellow pollen flying from one to the other' " (36)—much of Mr. Mybug's behaviour in general suggests that he seeks to emulate Lawrence's style:

> They used sometimes to walk through a pleasant wood of young birch trees which were just beginning to come into bud. The stems reminded Mr. Mybug of phallic symbols and the buds made Mr. Mybug think of nipples and virgins. Mr. Mybug pointed out to Flora that he and she were walking on seeds which were germinating in the womb of the earth. He said it made him feel as if he were trampling on the body of a great brown woman. He felt as if he were a partner in some mighty rite of gestation.
>
> Flora used sometimes to ask him the name of a tree, but he never knew. (*CCF*, 121)

Mr. Mybug's sexually obsessed manner is rendered even more farcical and inappropriate by its juxtaposition with Flora's rational and intellectual way of regarding the same objects. Nor is this adoption of the Lawrentian style limited to the depiction of Mr. Mybug. One of the techniques which most characterizes Lawrence's

novels are his long, descriptive passages, in which nature is treated almost as a character, in and of itself. The qualities of the environment in his novels are routinely sexualized and psychoanalyzed, a technique which results in a peculiarly potent (in both senses of the word) view of the earth, and those activities which bring man closer to it:

> They felt the rush of the sap in spring, they knew the wave which cannot halt, but every year throws forward the seed to begetting, and falling back, leaves the young-born on the earth. They knew the intercourse between heaven and earth, sunshine drawn into the breast and bowels, the rain sucked up in the daytime, nakedness that comes under the wind in autumn, showing the birds' nests no longer worth hiding. Their life and inter-relations were such; feeling the pulse and body of the soil, that opened to their furrow for the grain, and became smooth and supple after their ploughing, and clung to their feet with a weight that pulled like desire, lying hard and unresponsive when the crops were to be shorn away.... They took the udder of the cows, the cows yielded milk and pulse against the hands of the men, the pulse of the blood of the teats of the cows beat into the pulse of the hands of the men.... [The] limbs and the body of the men were impregnated with the day, cattle and earth and vegetation and the sky, the men sat by the fire and their brains were inert, as their blood flowed heavy with the accumulation from the living day. (*The Rainbow*, 9-10)

Echoes of this style of narration also appear in *Cold Comfort Farm*, with an equal, if more humorous, emphasis on the fecundity of nature.

> *** From the stubborn interwoven strata of his subconscious, thought seeped up into his dim conscious; not as an integral part of that consciousness, but more as an impalpable emanation, a crepuscular addition, from the unsleeping life in the restless trees and field surrounding him. The country for miles, under the blanket of the dark which brought no peace, was in its annual tortured ferment of spring growth; worm jarred with worm and seed with seed. Frond leapt on root and hare on hare. Beetle and finch-fly were not spared. The trout-sperm in the muddy hollow under Nettle Flitch Weir were agitated, and well they might be. The long screams of the hunting owls tore across the night, scarlet lines on black. In the pauses, every ten minutes, they mated. It seemed chaotic, but it was more methodically arranged than you might think. But Adam's deafness and blindness came from within,

> as well as without; earthly calm seeped up from his subconscious and met descending calm in his conscious. (*CCF*, 45)

Again, Gibbons undermines the motif in such novels of the sexuality of the earth by focusing all of the sexual energy and potency in Adam, the ninety year-old farm hand for whom Cold Comfort Farm's cows are more the object of his affections than any woman.

While the works of Hardy, Webb, Kaye-Smith, and Lawrence provide the principal objects of the parody, displaying Gibbons' extensive knowledge of literature, it is the references to the novels of Austen and the Brontës which are the primary focus of this thesis. As with the relationship between *Cold Comfort Farm* and the novels of agricultural life it sends up, the connection with Austen and the Brontës cannot be simplified into the forms of influence or inspiration; rather, it is a mutually enriching relationship, in which an understanding of these earlier works allows the reader both to recognize the greater depths of meaning that Gibbons adds to her own novel through allusion and quotation, and to gain new insight and a new way of viewing these classics of English literature. To facilitate the reader's understanding of this relationship, in Chapter 1 I shall provide a close study of the ways in which Gibbons' heroine, Flora Poste, has been created to share the same qualities and situations which define Austen's heroines; Chapter 2 will be devoted to a similar examination of the ways in which *Cold Comfort Farm* itself has been imbued with the sensibilities and motifs of the novels of the Brontës. In my final chapter, I shall examine Gibbons' intentions in establishing these connections through her use of traditional motifs from

the works which *Cold Comfort Farm* parodies, and by which Gibbons has been inspired.

Chapter 1 "A Tidy Mind": Flora Poste as an Austenian Heroine

In the process of incorporating aspects of Jane Austen's works into her own parody, Gibbons has illuminated the greatest strengths of these novels, both paying homage to her predecessor, and borrowing familiar themes and motifs to use for her own ironic purposes. Of the qualities for which Austen is admired, her consummate skill in creating unforgettable characters is most evident; while the elements of plot and theme and the careful descriptions of events and places found in Austen's works effectively demonstrate the attention to detail that is the hallmark of her writing, her novels are essentially character-driven. The reader is carried through the many trials and tribulations that make up the narration by an interest in the characters—particularly the heroine of each piece—generated by Austen's ability to imbue her characters with the trappings of human nature, even on her "little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory..." (*Letters*, 469). The most important element of the novel for me to address, therefore, in illustrating the connection between the works of Austen and Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm*, is the area in which Austen's and Gibbons' genius coincide, and in which their talent is most evident—the delineation of characters. Especially, it is Gibbons' heroine, as unforgettable in her own way as such beloved characters as Austen's Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot, who provides the reader with the context for examining the intertextual relationship between these two authors.

Flora Poste, the central figure of *Cold Comfort Farm*, begins the process of aligning herself with Austen's heroines when she describes to her confidante, Mrs. Smiling, her sense of kinship with the author:

> "If you ask me," continued Flora, "I think I have much in common with Miss Austen. She liked everything to be tidy and pleasant and comfortable about her, and so do I." (*CCF*, 20)

Once this apparently innocuous comment plants the suggestion that connections exist between *Cold Comfort Farm* and Austen's works, subsequent allusions are easier to distinguish. The abundance of such references as Gibbons' choice of epigram, "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery" (420), a quotation from the final chapter of *Mansfield Park*, and her direct mention of *Persuasion*,[1] suggests that their use has been a deliberate move on Gibbons' part. The more subtle relationships between Flora and Austen's heroines then become apparent, revealing that Flora Poste has been constructed from the defining characteristics, both positive and negative, of her Austenian counterparts, an organizational technique of which Flora herself, with her "tidy mind" (*CCF*, 21), would approve. The resulting creature is one who, with ease, could fit into the imaginative world of Austen's novels.

In the first few chapters of *Cold Comfort Farm*, the reader is introduced to a woman who shares the most positive qualities of both Austen and her heroines. Like the author herself, Flora possesses an irrepressible appreciation of the ridiculous, and a sense of humour which is always in evidence, even in the midst of the most serious of topics, such as the sudden death of her parents:

> "Was the funeral awful?" inquired Mrs. Smiling....
> Flora replied that it had been horrid. She added that she was bound to say all the older relatives seemed to have enjoyed it no end. (*CCF*, 13)

---

[1] " 'Well, when I am fifty-three or so I would like to write a novel as good as *Persuasion*, but with a modern setting, of course.'" (*CCF*, 20)

This attitude echoes sentiments often expressed in Austen's work by such characters as *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr. Bennet[2]. Flora is strong and intelligent, with opinions as decided as any that issued from the lips of Austen's boldest heroines, Elizabeth Bennet or Emma Woodhouse. She displays Elinor Dashwood's "strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment" (*SS*, 4) in assessing her situation and considering her options for the future. Moreover, like such characters as the self-sacrificing Fanny Price and Anne Elliot, Flora has a genuine desire to be useful, from which stems her decision to brave the privations of Cold Comfort Farm.

While this abstract summary of Flora's qualities may suggest the character of a paragon of virtue, this positive side of her nature is tempered by serious flaws of both situation and character. In modeling her heroine after Austen's, Gibbons was not only constrained by, but also undoubtedly in complete agreement with her predecessor's decided opinions regarding novels and heroines; in Austen's own words, "pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked" (*Letters*, 486-87). It is this distaste for perfection in characterization which drives Austen's novels, as it is the development of her heroines which provides most of the action. Each of these central characters has an obstacle to overcome which takes one of two forms: an external influence or situation which keeps her in a position where her true nature cannot be expressed; or an inner fault, a flaw in her character which she must recognize and eliminate before happiness can be attained. When the nature of these obstacles are determined for Austen's

---

2 "Indeed, Mr. Bennet," said she, "it is very hard to think that Charlotte Lucas should ever be mistress of this house, that *I* should be forced to make way for *her*, and live to see her take my place in it!"

"My dear, do not give way to such gloomy thoughts. Let us hope for better things. Let us flatter ourselves that *I* may be the survivor." (*PP*, 118)

heroines, and compared to the situation and character of Flora Poste, it becomes clear that Flora shares with the central characters of Austen's novels each of their greatest hardships.

By establishing connections between Flora and the heroines of Austen's novels, Gibbons reminds her readers what a traditional heroine is supposed to be, and how she should act, setting a series of expectations of how Flora will react to the misfortunes of an unsuitable situation, and a flawed nature. However, it is important to remember that Flora is not merely a heroine created by an author who reads Austen's works, and who understands the qualities of the Austenian heroine—Flora is *herself* a reader of Austen's novels. As a result, Flora is also aware of the manner in which Austen's heroines have coped with their own hardships, and can benefit from the wisdom of their experience; her course of action in the face of her own corresponding misfortunes suggests her disinclination to follow in their footsteps. In essence, Gibbons has given Flora the same disadvantages as Austen's heroines precisely so that Flora can disappoint the expectations that such connections create. In establishing her heroine in this manner, Gibbons playfully leads her readers, consciously or unconsciously, to anticipate the outcome of Flora's struggle against these misfortunes, and to judge her response to them according to her predecessors' reactions; the reading of her own work is enriched by what the reader knows of the outcomes of Austen's novels. In addition, these connections also become a commentary on Austen's works, for by considering how Flora reacts to the various misfortunes under which Austen's heroines suffer, the reader is also forced to reconsider how these characters respond to their challenges, and to speculate as to why their reactions and Flora's are so different.

In the most simplistic terms, Austen's heroines can be categorized as being either victimized or flawed. The first of these designations relates to those heroines struggling against a fault of situation, rather than one of character. To this group belong Austen's blameless heroines, Anne Elliot, Elinor Dashwood, and Fanny Price, those who are able to look back on their own conduct at the end of their respective novels without reproach. For these heroines, the development which forms the core of the novels relates to their ability to rise above their inherent powerlessness against the actions of others, and to face their suffering with grace. By doing so, they *earn* the happiness of finding a situation in which they can express their true natures, and be appreciated for their virtues and talents—in the context of Austen's novels, a marriage of equals. While Flora Poste's nature, which is further revealed as the plot of *Cold Comfort Farm* develops, is too delightfully flawed for her to be mistaken for one of Austen's blameless heroines, it becomes clear from the information provided early in the novel that she, too, labours under disadvantages of situation. A careful examination of these faults of situation reveals that Flora is not merely disadvantaged in the abstract, but undergoes the same specific privations that threaten Austen's heroines.

All of these blameless heroines suffer, to differing extents, as a result of two basic external factors which manifest themselves in different ways: influence and isolation. In the case of the former, this influence comes either from other characters, or from the past. For Anne Elliot, the heroine of *Persuasion*, the influence that threatens her happiness takes the form of persuasion itself. Early in Anne's career, she was convinced by the well-meaning but ultimately wrong-headed advice of her friend,

Lady Russell, to give up the man she loved, and all of her plans for the future; "She was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing—indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it" (*P*, 31). Further into the novel, Lady Russell's faulty judgment again comes to bear in an attempt to persuade Anne to marry her cousin, Mr. Elliot, whose vicious nature would doom Anne to unhappiness. Fanny Price, of *Mansfield Park*, is similarly oppressed by the influence of others. When she does not live up to the expectations of her relatives, the Bertrams, they attempt to bully her into submission, pushing her to act against her judgment—for instance by acting in the theatrical production at Mansfield Park, or accepting Henry Crawford's hand in marriage. While Fanny does not possess the strength of will to stake a claim to the situation she desires, marriage to her cousin, Edmund, her moral certainty helps her to stand fast against the influence of those by whom society deems she should be led, to escape the fate of such a situation as would destroy the best aspects of her nature. For Elinor Dashwood, of *Sense and Sensibility*, the influence that stands in the way of her happiness is a product of both the involvement of others, and the past. Her desire for a quiet home life is upset by the indiscretions of her sister, Marianne; her ability to confide in her family is restricted by the confidence of a rival; and her hopes for a marriage of love between equals to Edward Ferrars are undermined by his prior commitment to Lucy Steele. These trials threaten to deny Elinor's judgment and practicality—so well suited for matrimony—their appropriate milieu, but, as with Anne and Fanny, admirably display the excellence of her nature.

The other external factor that distresses Austen's blameless heroines is emotional isolation, which results from the disparity of temperament between

themselves and their respective relations. In Anne's case, this isolation manifests itself in the slight regard by which she is held by the members of her own family, none of whom has the discernment to be an accurate judge of character:

> ... Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister. (*P*, 11-12)

As a result of this undervaluing of Anne's merits, she is threatened by the prospect of never being able to display them before people who will appreciate them. Elinor is likewise isolated by a difference in temperament; in this case, Elinor's sense and reason separate her from her mother and sisters, who suffer from an excess of sentiment. Because Marianne, Margaret, and Mrs. Dashwood's collective mode of expression and view of life are so self-absorbing and different from Elinor's, they are unable to recognize her merits, or provide her with emotional support in her times of trial. Like Anne and Elinor, Fanny is also very different in nature from her relatives, but her isolation is much more a product of her position as a dependent. Fanny is never permitted to forget the extraordinary generosity of the Bertrams in adopting her into their household. The constant reminders of the gratitude expected of her, and the distinction between herself as a dependent, and the other members of the family, are most responsible for the oppression of her spirits, and the lack of opportunity for her sterling qualities to shine. Each of these blameless heroines, as a result of her isolation, seems doomed to obscurity, and segregation from her intellectual equals.

For Flora Poste, the same external factors of influence and isolation threaten to undermine her quest for happiness. Flora, like Anne, is under the influence of an advisor whose counsel runs contrary to the heroine's true nature. Mrs. Smiling,

Flora's childhood friend, attempts to persuade Flora to give up her plan of seeking out material for her future novels with her relatives, and seeks to impose her own system of values on Flora:

> "You must stay here with me, and learn typing and short-hand, and then you can be somebody's secretary and have a nice little flat of your own, and we can have lovely parties..." (*CCF*, 16)

While Mrs. Smiling's advice is by no means as detrimental to Flora's future as Lady Russell's is to Anne's, she is attempting to undermine a plan which will allow Flora to express her true nature. In the same way that Fanny's family tries to intimidate her, Flora is bullied when she oversteps the boundaries set for her by the Starkadders. Her attempt to save Elfine from her arranged marriage to Urk meets with the threat "... she's mine—...and God help the man or woman who tries to take her from me" (*CCF*, 142). Influences from the past also threaten Flora's happiness, as they do Elinor's; Flora's inquiries to her relatives at Cold Comfort are met with these ominous reminders of yesteryears:

> So you are after your rights at last... Child, my man once did your father a great wrong. If you will come to us I will do my best to atone, but you must never ask me what for. My lips are sealed. (*CCF*, 26)

For Flora's entire stay at Cold Comfort, the past hangs over her head, an obstacle to her plans for exercising her talents; since knowledge of the past is denied to her, she cannot even mitigate its influence. Like Elinor, she "suffer[s] the punishment of an attachment" (or in this case, Flora's claim), "without enjoying its advantages" (*SS*, 229), and her present contentment is sacrificed for the sake of someone else's past. In the tradition of Austen's own heroines, Flora's ability to resist these influences must be tested as a part of her development, and Gibbons encourages her readers to anticipate

that Flora's future, like Anne's, Elinor's, and Fanny's, will be jeopardized by this test, and that she will display resignation and acceptance equal to these blameless heroines' own reactions.

Flora also suffers from the same isolation that burdens her predecessors, by virtue of both her singular nature and her position as a dependent. An equal disparity of temperament existed between Flora and her late parents as between Austen's heroines and their respective families. Flora's character is established early in the novel as being artistic, orderly, unsentimental, and opinionated; her character traits could not have been valued by her father, "who had been serious about games and contemptuous of the arts" (*CCF*, 13), her mother, "who had wished people to live beautiful lives and yet be ladies and gentlemen" (*CCF*, 13), or the denizens of Cold Comfort Farm, with their skewed impressions of appropriate behaviour. This similarity of situation between Flora and her predecessors, indicated early in the novel, suggests, even before the action at Cold Comfort Farm begins, that Flora will be an outcast in this environment. As a dependent in her new home, Flora's connection to these heroines, especially Fanny, is further reinforced. The expectation created by these connections with Anne, Elinor, and Fanny is that Flora will display the same graceful resignation to her isolation and dependence, and will use her misfortune to grow more pure in her sweetness and self-sacrificing good will.

For Austen's blameless heroines, the disadvantages of situation under which they labour serve both to advance the plot, and to create a setting in which Anne, Elinor, and Fanny's best collective qualities can be displayed. The dignity and grace with which these characters resign themselves to their misfortunes, and accept the

disappointment of their hopes, excite the admiration of those around them, including the reader. When these disadvantages are eliminated—not so much overcome by any action by the heroines, as dispelled by Austen's invention—the reader is satisfied that these figures have been rewarded for their virtues.

In Flora's case, these same misfortunes have the potential, at the beginning of the novel, to elevate Flora likewise through suffering. However, rather than submitting gracefully to the vicissitudes of fate, Flora chooses instead to defy the expectations of how a heroine should react. She not only takes an active part in eliminating the disadvantages ranged against her, but actually uses them to empower herself. Flora's misfortunes are transformed into advantages by her stubborn nature. Mrs. Smiling's attempts at persuasion actually have a positive effect on Flora's resolution, as it is the objection to her plan of staying with the Starkadders that provides the goad Flora needs to make up her mind to go through with it. Attempts to bully her into submission do not frighten Flora as they do Fanny, but rather spur her on to greater resolution and effort:

> Difficult times lay ahead.
>
> But this was what Flora liked. She detested rows and scenes, but enjoyed quietly pitting her cool will against opposition. (*CCF*, 129-30)

The past, which so seriously threatens Elinor's future, could likewise interfere with Flora's relationship with the Starkadders, but serves instead to justify Flora's decision to reside with them, convincing her that she may benefit from the history between the two families; she relies on the force of her own personality to overcome the secrets of the past, and their effect on the Starkadders' perception of her. The isolation that Flora experiences as a result of the difference in temperament between herself and her

parents allows her to pursue her future without the additional hardship of grief; the disparity of nature between herself and the Starkadders provides the emotional distance and perspective needed to recognize their problems, and find solutions to them. Even her dependence on her family does not overwhelm her spirits; instead it provides a plan of action for what she will do following her parents' deaths:

> "I am only nineteen, but I have already observed that whereas there still lingers some absurd prejudice against living on one's friends, no limits are set, either by society or by one's own conscience, to the amount one may impose upon one's relatives.... When I have found a relative who is willing to have me, I shall take him or her in hand, and alter his or her character and mode of living to suit my own taste." (*CCF*, 15-16)

Instead of being oppressed by her move to unfamiliar surroundings, Flora embraces the opportunity for a new challenge. Thus, while Flora is linked by these negative influences to Anne, Elinor, and Fanny, her reactions defy the predictions these connections would seem to suggest; rather than suffering silently, and trusting in fate to reward such virtue, Flora views her disadvantages as justification for abandoning dignified resignation in favour of pursuing her future with a vengeance. Moreover, the disparity between the reactions of Flora and her predecessors to the same situations becomes a commentary, subtle but pointed, on how Gibbons personally views Anne, Elinor, and Fanny; given Flora's relentless determination, Gibbons undoubtedly regards Austen's blameless heroines as provokingly passive, and uses her own novel as a playful forum for an imaginative misreading or re-writing of their behaviour.

The connections that are established between Flora and Austen's blameless heroines also suggest that she will share some of the qualities of Austen's other group of heroines, the flawed characters of Catherine Morland, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma

Woodhouse, and Marianne Dashwood. In these instances, it is the central character's maturation—a struggle against her own flawed and self-deluded nature, instead of one against the influence of others—rather than her situation, which moves the action forward. In determining the precise nature of these defects, and comparing them to Flora's own more interesting and less admirable qualities, the reader becomes aware that Flora's faults, like her situation, mirror those of Austen's flawed heroines. Just as Gibbons creates expectations of Flora's reactions to her situation in the context of Austen's novels, so too does she encourage her readers to anticipate the outcome of Flora's struggle with shortcomings similar to those of her predecessors.

As with her connection to Austen's blameless heroines, Flora's association with the flawed heroines through their shared character faults provides Flora with an opportunity to flout the expectation that she will, like Catherine Morland, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, and Marianne Dashwood, recognize her self-delusion and overcome the defects that threaten to undermine her happiness. Each of these heroines has a moment of revelation in which she realizes the error of her ways, experiences shame for her faults, and begins the process of reforming herself, so that she will deserve the same rewards as her blameless counterparts. Flora, however, is shameless. Rather than undergoing the humiliation of an epiphany, Flora either ignores the consequences of her flaws, or revels in them. The flaws themselves, instead of being something to master, become the tools which Flora uses to succeed in creating a place for herself, and protect her from being drawn into the Starkadders' world of melodrama and sordid emotion.

Catherine Morland, the unsophisticated heroine of Austen's first novel, *Northanger Abbey*, is initially presented through an analysis of her suitability as a traditional heroine, a narrative technique which prepares the reader for the introduction of the flaw in her character, a passion for reading gothic novels. This pastime, though harmless in and of itself, leads Catherine into the habit of regarding the world through eyes clouded by romance, and to judge the reactions of those around her according to the strictures of human nature laid down in such misleading texts. A product of her youth and inexperience, this imperfection in Catherine's otherwise unspoiled nature threatens to destroy the blossoming relationship between herself and Henry Tilney, whose father she all but accuses of practising the type of villainy found between the pages of the novels of Mrs. Radcliffe:

> His cruelty to such a charming woman made him odious to her. She had often read of such characters; characters, which Mr. Allen had been used to call unnatural and overdrawn; but here was proof positive to the contrary. (*NA*, 144)

Catherine's outrageous suppositions almost gain for her the contempt of the man she loves, and it is a necessary part of her maturation, and her development as a character, to recognize the absurdity of her construction of reality and to resolve to indulge her imagination no further.

The same tendency of "novelizing" the world around her also characterizes Flora Poste. Her experience as a reader is considerably wider than Catherine's, including philosophical tracts, Victorian romances, the earthy novels of rural life which Gibbons is parodying in *Cold Comfort Farm*, and the works of Austen and the Brontës. However, her tendency to construct reality after fictional models is the same,

and her own expectations of the people she meets at Cold Comfort Farm are based on literary types and motifs:

> Mrs. Starkadder was the Dominant Grandmother Theme, which was found in all typical novels of agricultural life (and sometimes in novels of urban life, too). It was, of course, right and proper that Mrs. Starkadder should be in possession at Cold Comfort; Flora should have suspected her existence from the beginning. (*CCF*, 57)

This connection between Catherine and Flora suggests that Flora, too, will be misled by her tendency to view the world as a reflection of literature, and that overcoming this character flaw will be a necessary step to achieving happiness. However, Flora manages to escape Catherine's fate, exhibiting a lofty disdain for the traditions of character development. The tendency of viewing her new acquaintances as the characters from a novel becomes a strength in Flora, providing her with a context for dealing with them, and allowing her to enjoy their idiosyncrasies without being adversely affected by their alien way of life. When she discovers that there are real people behind the archetypes by which she has defined the Starkadders, no horror attends the discovery; she simply accepts them as such, and moves on, without feeling that she has been unjust, or resolving to behave differently in the future. This difference in reactions also illuminates one of the most ironic things about Catherine's abasement at the end of *Northanger Abbey*, and a question which Gibbons not doubt revelled in being able to pose, even obliquely—why should Catherine *not* regard life as a novel, given that she is actually the heroine of a work of fiction?

Austen's best-known and most-beloved heroine, *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth Bennet, has several character flaws that stand in the way of her happiness, most

notably the prejudice for which the novel is named, and the disenchantment with the world from which that prejudice derives. Elizabeth says of herself:

> "There are few people whom I really love, and fewer still of whom I think well. The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either merit or sense." (*PP*, 121)

This misanthropy, as the source of her wit, is a danger to Elizabeth's future. Because Elizabeth enjoys finding flaws in her acquaintances, she is inclined to treat idiosyncrasies as faults; because she has a gift for witticisms, she broadcasts her opinions of these faults, which, once given, are difficult to retract, and which cause more damage that she anticipates. Her prejudice leads her to misjudge Mr. Darcy, and to rebuff him with a full explication of her opinion of him, and thereby almost destroys the regard of a man who is her intellectual equal, and is more capable of ensuring her happiness than she realizes. In order to complete her development as a character, Elizabeth must be humbled by the discovery of her flaws.

Flora and Elizabeth are strikingly similar in nature, holding many of the same opinions of the world around them. Consider the resemblance between Flora's misanthropic statements and Elizabeth's:

> "On the whole I dislike my fellow-beings; I find them so difficult to understand." (*CCF*, 21)

The concordance of attitudes in these statements is too remarkable to be coincidental. Flora's wit, which is usually reserved for her own contemplations, also finds expression in outlets similar to those used by Elizabeth. On the topic of love, for example, Elizabeth poses a rhetorical question:

> "Is not general incivility the very essence of love?" (*PP*, 126)

Flora contemplates the same subject in the following manner:

> "Curious how Love destroys every vestige of that politeness which the human race, in its years of evolution, has so painfully acquired." (*CCF*, 31)

This resemblance of ideas leads the reader into a recognition of another similarity—a tendency towards prejudice. Prior to her arrival at Cold Comfort Farm, Flora has already made up her mind as to what the Starkadders will be like. Part of this judgment is based on Flora's instincts as a reader, but much of it is simple snobbery, and the desire to be clever and witty:

> "I think if I find that I have any third cousins living at Cold Comfort Farm... who are named Seth, or Reuben, I shall decide not to go."
>
> "Why?"
>
> "Oh, because highly sexed young men living on farms are always called Seth or Reuben, and it would be such a nuisance. And my cousin's name, remember, is Judith... Her husband is almost certain to be called Amos; and if he *is*, it will be a typical farm, and you know what *they* are like." (*CCF*, 23)

Despite the fact that Flora has never met the Starkadders, she is prepared to base her entire relationship with them on her own patronizing pre-conceptions; like Elizabeth, Flora seems destined for a rude awakening of the dangers of such prejudice, and the humiliation of being proven wrong in spite of her cleverness. However, Flora again defies the expectations of the reader, scorning to react according to the established mode of heroines upon discovering her flaw. While Elizabeth's shame at her mistake is severe, and the immediate consequence is the conviction that her imperfections have cost her the esteem of a man whom she has learned too late to appreciate, Flora, on the other hand, uses her prejudice against the Starkadders to prepare herself for the

privations she will meet at Cold Comfort Farm—"'Worst fears realized darling seth and reuben too send gumboots'" (*CCF*, 50). This cynicism also protects Flora from the initial disapprobation she meets, for she has too little regard for her relatives, based on her pre-judgment, to care for their good opinion. Again, the difference between these reactions forces the reader to reassess the validity of Elizabeth's disgrace. After all, she is justified in her original assessment of Mr. Darcy's behaviour, just as Flora is in her evaluation of the Starkadders, and her prejudice against him is actually necessary to bring about the novel's happy resolution, as it is this flaw that goads Mr. Darcy to amend his own nature.

Emma Woodhouse, a heroine whom Austen expected no one would really like, also belongs to this group of flawed characters. Austen actually tells the reader on the opening pages what these flaws are, rather than revealing them in the course of the novel:

> The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. (*E*, 4)

The product of these faults is a tendency on Emma's part to meddle in the affairs of others, though her experience with the world and her understanding of human nature are too limited for her schemes to meet with any success. As the result of a lack of occupation that follows Emma's separation from her closest friend and confidante, she undertakes the enterprise of re-making Harriet Smith in her own image, thereby undermining Harriet's greatest charms—her artless manner and her humility:

> *She* would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners. (*E*, 20)

In spite of her good intentions, Emma's meddling only makes Harriet unfit for the society into which she was born, and encourages her to raise her expectations beyond her own level. This arrogance also leads Emma into the habit of discounting the feelings of others, of saying and doing precisely what she chooses. In such a manner does she injure Miss Bates, making sport of her in front of all of their mutual friends at Box Hill. In doing so, Emma endangers her own best hope for a marriage of love between equals, and a situation suited to her nature, for her actions earn her the disapprobation of Mr. Knightley.

When Flora makes the decision to go to her relatives at Cold Comfort Farm, she does so with the expressed intention of indulging in the same type of meddling that gets Emma into such trouble:

> "I am sure it would be more amusing to go and stay with some of these dire relatives... perhaps one or two of the relations will have messes or miseries in their domestic circle which I can clear up." (*CCF*, 21)

Once at Cold Comfort, Flora finds herself knee-deep in a number of these "messes" and "miseries," and sets herself the project—striking in its similarity to Emma's own schemes—of weaning Elfine, one of her cousins, from the influence of her family, and marrying her off to a member of the local gentry. Like Harriet Smith, Elfine is young, pretty, and artless; her tastes are undeveloped, tending towards arts and crafts, a tendency which Flora deplores as much as Emma does Harriet's contempt for short letters (*E*, 48). Flora pursues this project with an arrogance which mirrors Emma's, and her project seems doomed to the same unfortunate conclusion, with a trail of those

whom Flora has injured by her schemes strewn behind her, and the same humbling sense of culpability to endure. Once again, though, Gibbons has aligned her heroine with Austen's only to emphasize the disparity between their reactions. The arrogance and meddling that connect Flora and Emma draw the latter into remorse and contrition for her actions:

> With insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody's destiny. (*E*, 374)

Flora, in contrast, does not even have Emma's excuse of good intentions to mitigate her faults; her desire to meddle provides her with a plan of action for how she will amuse herself in her new surroundings, and her arrogance allows her to justify her actions by convincing her that she knows what is best for the Starkadders. Rather than deplore her own destructive, meddling tendencies, she revels in them to the end:

> "I," thought Flora simply, as she leant forward in the buggy and surveyed the scene, "did all that with my little hatchet." And a feeling of joy and content opened inside her like a flower. (*CCF*, 204)

Moreover, Gibbons uses the similarity of situation between Emma's and Flora's respective attempts at meddling to question why Harriet and Mr. Elton could not have been happy together. Austen's artistic decision is justified in the final chapters of the novel by the discovery that Harriet is the natural daughter of a merchant; Gibbons, in contrast, flouts the conventions of social status by marrying off her own incarnation of Harriet to a member of the gentry, and dares the reader to believe that they will be anything other than happy.

The last of Austen's flawed heroines, Marianne Dashwood, forms a marked contrast with her sister Elinor's behaviour in *Sense and Sensibility*, and possesses what

is, perhaps, the most disturbing of the heroines' character flaws, a kind of willful ignorance of appropriate conduct and morality. While we as readers recognize that morality is neither God-given nor self-evident, we are aware that there are basic standards of behaviour which define responsibility and respectability; Austen provides a model for such behaviour in Elinor, Marianne's sister, so that her readers are capable of recognizing the shortcomings of Marianne's own judgments and actions. Urged on by her own excess of sensibility, Marianne refuses to recognize the fact that her choices have consequences, and scorns the conventions of society, instead viewing her own desires as adequate justification for her actions. When she is questioned by Elinor on the doubtful etiquette of visiting the house of Mr. Willoughby's benefactress, her logic betrays her skewed sense of right and wrong:

> "I am afraid," replied Elinor, "that the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety."
>
> "On the contrary, nothing can be stronger proof of it, Elinor; for if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure." (*SS*, 59)

Marianne is constantly being led astray by her inability or her unwillingness to recognize the impropriety, and even the immorality, of her thoughts and actions; she injures everyone around her by her impetuosity, and is unable to see the consequences of her behaviour until it is almost too late to make amends. In spite of her vaunted sensibility, her enlightenment shows her to have been not only selfish, but also callous in her disregard of any emotions but her own.

Flora is a very different creature from Marianne, preferring sense to Marianne's sensibility, but she too exhibits a disturbing degree of selfishness and a disregard for

conventional morality. Caught up in the enjoyment of her intrigues, Flora exercises her talents for tidying up "untidy lives" (*CCF*, 21) ruthlessly, without considering the feelings of those she manipulates, or recognizing that there is something wrong in her assumption that her life-philosophy is inherently better than that of the Starkadders. Her conscience bothers her only once in the course of her campaign, in the idea of "planning to palm off Elfine on [Mrs. Hawk-Monitor's] only son" (*CCF*, 129); rather than giving up her plan, she compounds the fault by spurring herself on to make greater changes to Elfine's nature— "There was only one way of soothing her tiresome conscience. Elfine must be transformed indeed; her artiness must be rooted out" (*CCF*, 130). With equal callousness, she upsets the lives of all the other occupants of Cold Comfort Farm, believing, in her arrogance, that her judgment is sufficient to justify the chaos she creates for her own pleasure. Like Marianne, she is unwilling to see the immoral—or, at least, amoral—nature of her actions. According to the conventions Austen has established, Flora must, like Marianne, be brought to a recognition of how her selfishness and reckless behaviour have affected the people around her, and must not only acknowledge these faults herself, but apologize to those that she has injured. By this time, however, it should come as no surprise to the reader that Flora again manages to sidestep developing along traditional lines. Though the consequences of Flora's actions, in which she takes such pleasure, have upset the lives of those around her to a considerably greater degree than those of Marianne's, Flora persists in willfully ignoring the immorality of her behaviour. Rather than making amends for the chaos she creates, she instead removes all those adversely affected by her schemes—like Judith—from the immediate scene. This disregard for conventional morality, which

results in so much oppression of spirit in Marianne, protects Flora to the end from the twinges of conscience that might otherwise attend her machinations. Here, Gibbons is again ironically questioning the need for Marianne to be punished for her actions, even to the extent that she almost dies for her sins; she speaks for the modern reader, who wonders what is so wrong about Marianne fighting for her own happiness with whatever means are at her disposal. Flora is proof positive that the ends often *do* justify the means.

In borrowing elements from Austen's work, Gibbons is, of course, paying homage to her predecessor's abilities, indicating through her knowledge of the details in these novels how often they have been read. However, the technique of creating an intertextual relationship between works also introduces the potential for satire, as the manipulation of each of Austen's models provides an opportunity for Gibbons to illustrate—through Flora's actions—her own opinion of these conventions. The adventures of *Cold Comfort Farm* give not only Gibbons, but also Flora herself, the opportunity to re-write Austen's novels in their own image; Flora's pretensions towards becoming an author, and her knowledge of what has happened to her predecessors, allows her to escape their misfortunes. The fact that she turns their adversities into advantages becomes a statement of Flora's—and by extension, Gibbons'—own views of how a heroine should behave. In essence, *Cold Comfort Farm* provides Flora with an opportunity of depicting how different Austen's novels would have been had she been the heroine: how with a little more resolution and industry on Emma's part, for example, Harriet would have married Mr. Elton; how Henry Crawford would have been sent about his business by Fanny long before he could

disturb her tranquillity; and how Anne would have married Captain Wentworth when she was nineteen, and saved herself eight years of heartache. Nor would character development have been the focus of the novels, for Flora declines to examine her own motives, or repent her flaws; disdaining to follow the traditions that accompany her status as a heroine, she is more interested in tidying other people's lives than in cleaning the film of complacent self-delusion from her own view of reality.

Chapter 2 "Untidy Lives": The World of *Cold Comfort Farm* as Brontëan Novel

Just as the works of Austen are connected to *Cold Comfort Farm* through their respective heroines, a similar intertextual relationship exists between the novel as a whole and the works of the other great women authors to whom Gibbons alludes, Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë. While the world of the Starkadders is clearly akin to the primary subjects of Gibbons' parody, the earthy, rural novels of Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, Mary Webb, and Sheila Kaye-Smith, there also exists a more subtle and distant connection—like that between second cousins—to the strange and wonderful atmosphere of such novels as *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Agnes Grey*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

The intertextual relationship between Gibbons' novel and the works of the Brontës is established by Mr. Mybug, an intellectual who has dedicated himself to proving that Patrick Branwell Brontë was the author of his sisters' novels. When Flora questions Mrs. Murther, the landlady of the Condemn'd Man, she discovers this ambition:

> "He's doin' one now about another young fellow who wrote books, and then his sisters pretended *they* wrote them, and then they all died of consumption, poor young mommets." (*CCF*, 75-76)

Mr. Mybug's thesis, which also includes claims that Branwell's sisters were notorious drunkards, and that Branwell himself cherished an illicit and incestuous passion for his aunt—illustrated in three letters by his tender inquiries into her rheumatism—has a kind of lunacy which is well-adapted to the world of Cold Comfort Farm. In fact, in Mr. Mybug's version the Brontës might themselves be long-lost kin to the Starkadders,

so tortured and incomprehensible are their relations with each other. By the time this connection is established, the reader has already been introduced to the denizens of this strange new world, and has had the opportunity to recover from the initial encounter with the oddities of Sussex, the privations of Cold Comfort Farm, and the Starkadders themselves. Having assimilated these details, the reader finds it easier to recognize and accept the suggested relationship between the Brontës and their creations, and the particulars of Gibbons' novel.

If the style of Austen's novels is, by her own admission, occasionally "rather too light, and bright, and sparkling" (*Letters*, 299), and thereby provides a perfect model for Flora's playful manner and ready wit, that of the Brontës affords ample shade for the development of the Starkadders. Although most of the more grotesque and comic qualities of the world of *Cold Comfort Farm* are products of Gibbons' parody of the rural novels of Hardy, Lawrence, Webb, and Kaye-Smith, there also exists a pervading sense of gloom, of emotional upheaval and Nature run amuck, which harks back to such remarkable novels as *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. Flora's—and by association, Gibbons'—familiarity with these works, illustrated by her immediate recognition of the mythology surrounding the Brontës, gives some evidence of Gibbons' regard for them; her very ability to parody these works of literature rests on her frequent readings and careful study of them. When Gibbons refers in her foreword to the works of the fictitious Anthony Pookworthy, Esquire, she is also alluding to the Brontës' style:

> [Your own books] are records of intense spiritual struggles, staged in the wild setting of mere, berg or fen. Your characters are ageless and

> elemental things, tossed like straws on the seas of passion. You paint Nature at her rawest, in man and in landscapes. (*CCF*, 8)

Gibbons herself seems here to have recognized the enormous emotional power of these novels, and the wild and vivid beauty of their characters and settings.

However, as *Cold Comfort Farm* is a parody rather than a panegyric, Gibbons' inclusion of this sketch of Brontëan novels in her foreword serves an additional purpose of providing the reader with a preview of the novel's connection to the Brontës, and the way these references should be interpreted. In the same paragraph, Gibbons changes the tone of her tribute with a reference to Pookworthy's "masterly analysis of a bilious attack" (*CCF*, 8), suggesting that both the sublime and the ridiculous can exist in the same works of literature. Although the novels in question were written by three different authors, there is a certain similarity of style which renders it a simpler matter for the modern reader to regard them as a unified whole. Indeed, one of Charlotte Brontë's contemporary critics maintained that the works not only resembled each other in style, but were actually written by the same author at different stages in his career, representing various levels of maturity (*Life*, 237). The principal quality of this shared—though singular—style is that of melancholy, and a persistent sense of impending doom and inescapable fates that render them likely subjects for the parody of such a humourist as Gibbons. While *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are moving and powerful novels, there is also a melodramatic quality to them—expressed in the extraordinary natures of characters like Heathcliff and Shirley Keeldar, and such whiplash-inducing plot developments as Jane Eyre's discovery of her long-lost family or Bertha Rochester's

timely demise—which often strike the modern reader as rather absurd. In essence, *Cold Comfort Farm* is Gibbons' amused commentary on her own reactions to the most improbable elements of the Brontës' novels; like *The Higher Common Sense*, "it [is] an attempt, not to explain the [Brontëan] Universe, but to reconcile Man to its inexplicability" (*CCF*, 57).

The elements of setting, character, and plot in the Brontës' novels are significant, not only in themselves, but also as they contribute to the style and atmosphere of the novels as a whole; in being similarly adopted by Gibbons, these motifs help to transfer this same atmosphere to the milieu of *Cold Comfort Farm*, and themselves become objects of the parody. For the modern reader, as for Gibbons herself, these novels contain an unusual amount of madness, family re-unions, and bad weather. In order to accomplish her parody, Gibbons explores such recurring themes to provide a context for the development of the Starkadders, and contributes her own interpretation of some of the Brontëan motifs that she finds the most prevalent and inexplicable.

One of the most unlikely and most hilarious of these motifs is porridge, a topic which provides Gibbons with a perfect opportunity for some delicious parody. It seems incomprehensible to the twentieth-century reader, and apparently to Gibbons as well, that a breakfast food could be charged with as much emotional significance as porridge is in both *Wuthering Heights*, where Isabella's introduction to her new home is marked by her failure to master this particular culinary delight (142), and *Jane Eyre*, where burnt porridge becomes a symbol of the hardships faced by the heroine at Lowood Institution (46), and an emblem of the hardships Jane Eyre faces in escaping

from the influence of Thornfield (334). Partaking of the Brontëan predilection for anthropomorphizing inanimate objects, Gibbons makes breakfast at Cold Comfort Farm likewise significant:

> The porridge gave an ominous leering heave; it might almost have been endowed with life, so uncannily did its movements keep pace with the human passions that throbbed above it. (*CCF*, 38-9)

By assimilating these motifs into her own novel, Gibbons achieves the same end that they accomplish in their original context—specifically, their presence is responsible for the mood that pervades the Brontës' works, and is the principal quality which drives their novels. For Gibbons, the inclusion of this motif in her own work as a symbol of emotional upheaval also provides her with the opportunity to ask us, as readers, obliquely, whether we understand any better than she does what the Brontës are trying to say about the significance of porridge.

The principal objects of Gibbons' parody, the novels of Mary Webb and Sheila Kaye-Smith, provide many of the details which form the setting of *Cold Comfort Farm*. The county of Sussex itself has been chosen as a specific aspect of the parody, its prevalence in such novels of agricultural life giving rise to some of Flora's most firmly-held preconceptions. There is, however, a quality to the descriptions of Cold Comfort Farm and its environs that also suggests a connection to the county of Yorkshire, the images and associations of which dominate the works of the Brontës. When Mr. Lockwood first encounters the environs of Wuthering Heights, he describes it in the following terms:

> Pure, bracing ventilation they must have up there, at all times, indeed: one may guess the power of the north wind, blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few, stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a

> range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun. Happily, the architect had foresight to build it strong: the narrow windows are deeply set in the wall, and the corners defended with large jutting stones. (*WH*, 2)

A similarly foreboding description characterizes the first sight of *Cold Comfort Farm*, which, while borrowing many of the details of the previous passage, manages to be even more ominous, and therefore more ironic:

> ** Dawn crept over the Downs like a sinister white animal, followed by the snarling cries of a wind eating its way between the black boughs of the thorns. The wind was the furious voice of this sluggish animal light that was baring the dormers and mullions and scullions of Cold Comfort Farm. (*CCF*, 32)

Three other aspects of setting also share more with *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* than they do with the works of Webb or Kaye-Smith: nature as a whole; Cold Comfort Farm itself; and Flora's room at the farm.

One of the most conspicuous elements of the Brontës' novels is the influence of nature, at both its most benevolent and its most hostile; indeed, this aspect of their works is so significant that nature becomes almost another character in the novel. Jane Eyre says of Nature (with a capital "N"):

> Nature seemed to me benign and good: I thought she loved me, outcast as I was; and I, who from man could anticipate only mistrust, rejection, insult, clung to her with filial fondness. To-night, at least, I would be her guest—as I was her child: my mother would lodge me without money and without price. (*JE*, 328)

Shirley Keeldar waxes even more poetic on the subject, with her tribute to Nature as the mother of titans (*S*, 319-21). The weather, too, becomes unusually significant, reflecting in its atmospheric tumult the emotional upheaval of the events occurring below, and the different aspects of the weather, particularly the wind, are likewise

personified. While this particular means of establishing the setting, both physical and emotional, of the novel can be extraordinarily effective and beautiful, it can also seem peculiar to modern sensibilities.

The element of nature in *Cold Comfort Farm*, in response to the Brontës' habit of anthropomorphizing the physical surroundings of their own works, likewise functions significantly in establishing the style of the novel; the text is liberally supplied with enough similes and personifications to make Gibbons' Nature even larger than Shirley's colossus. Typically, Gibbons punctuates the humour of this particular stylistic choice by not only using it as frequently as possible and pushing it to its logical extreme—as by comparing the sky to "a vast inverted *pot-de-chambre*" (*CCF*, 86)—but also by denying that she does it at all:

> The farm-house itself no longer looked like a beast about to spring. (Not that it ever had, to her, for she was not in the habit of thinking that things looked exactly like other things which were as different from them in appearance as it was possible to be.) (*CCF*, 204)

The sentiment expressed in this assertion reflects Gibbons' amusement at the prevalence of this particular mode of description, and the atmosphere it creates in the Brontës' novels. Gibbons comments ironically on the Brontës' habit of not only making "Nature" a character, but also allowing "her" to dictate the actions of their novels—says Flora, " 'Nature is all very well in her place, but she must not be allowed to make things untidy'" (*CCF*, 69).

The nature of Cold Comfort Farm itself also shows evidence of a connection to the works of the Brontës, especially *Wuthering Heights*, which illustrates how a physical space can contribute to the atmosphere of the work as a whole. The rough

exterior of Wuthering Heights, and the slovenly housekeeping manifested inside, are suggestive of the characters of those who live within, and the relationships between them; the antipathy between the inhabitants of Wuthering Heights is reflected in its slow degeneration. Cold Comfort Farm shares this sense of decay, of "sourness and ruin" (*CCF*, 55), which is a product of the negative energy that exists between members of a family kept together against its will. Just as the atmosphere changes at Wuthering Heights with the passage of time following Heathcliff's death, so too is Cold Comfort Farm able to break free from its slow dissolution. However, in typical ironic fashion, Gibbons attributes the change not merely to the emotional liberation of its inhabitants, but to more efficient house-keeping:

> Wages were paid regularly. Rooms were swept out occasionally; nay, they were even scrubbed. (*CCF*, 198)

It is also from the setting of *Wuthering Heights* that *Cold Comfort Farm* acquires one of its catch-phrases, "there have always been Starkadders at Cold Comfort" (*CCF*, 56), just as the carving over the threshold proves that there have always been Earnshaws at Wuthering Heights (*WH*, 2). By bringing the issue of ancestral rights into her own novel, and imbuing it with so much emotional import and so little real significance, Gibbons is also commenting on the absurdity of Joseph's heartfelt prayer at the end of *Wuthering Heights*, when Hareton is restored to his rightful place:

> I thought he intended to cut a caper round the bed; but suddenly composing himself, he fell on his knees, and raised his hands, and returned thanks that the lawful master and the ancient stock were restored to their rights. (*WH*, 335)

Within the walls of the farm, another aspect of the novel's setting exists which provides evidence of a stylistic connection to the Brontës' works. It is significant that

while most of the rooms at Cold Comfort receive but a cursory description, the passage regarding Flora's introduction to her room is replete with detail. A careful assessment of this description reveals that this room, significant in being the headquarters of Flora's campaign against the Starkadders' way of life, bears an uncanny resemblance to the red-room of *Jane Eyre*, the locale of one of the most harrowing episodes of the heroine's early years. The red-room at Gateshead-hall is described, with the following specifics: "the marble chimney-piece;" "a great looking-glass;" "the mahogany wardrobe;" "a bed supported on massive pillars of mahogany... spread with a snowy Marseilles counterpane;" and "curtains of deep red damask" (*JE*, 13-14). The terrifying fit that seizes Jane, and provides the catalyst for her final rebellion against her aunt, Mrs. Reed, not only takes place in this setting, but is actually a product of the room itself, and its associations. To such a reader as Gibbons, the effect that the red-room has on Jane Eyre is yet another of the riddles of the Brontës' novels, and it therefore becomes another of the subtle details of the parody. Gibbons not only places her own heroine in a red room, but painstakingly duplicates each of the details from *Jane Eyre* in her own setting:

> ... the mantelpiece was of marble, floridly carved, and yellowed by age and exposure.... The other mirror was a long one; it stood in the darkest corner of the room, and was hidden by a cupboard door when the latter was opened.... One wall was almost filled by a large mahogany wardrobe.... The bed was high, and made of mahogany; the quilt was a honeycomb, and white.... The curtains were magnificent. They were of soiled but regal red brocade, and kept much of the light and air out of the room. (*CCF*, 53-54)

By using each of these details in her own description, Gibbons reveals the red-room of Gateshead-hall to be nothing more than an elegantly-furnished, and unremarkable

room, and her own heroine's reaction to the same ambiance provides perspective for how the modern reader would see such a setting—"[Flora] decided that she liked it" (*CCF*, 53). In keeping with her industrious and undaunted nature, rather than succumbing to the same depression that seizes Jane Eyre, Flora arranges to have the curtains washed. The difference between Flora's reaction and Jane Eyre's brings into question how the decor could so traumatize Brontë's heroine.

As in the case of the details of setting, the elements of character and plot are paramount to the establishment of the singular style of the Brontës' novels. While in the works of many other authors, these elements can be examined individually, the characters that populate these particular novels possess a quality which inextricably links them to the situations in which they find themselves. Instead of reacting to their environment, and to the vicissitudes which alter the course of their lives, the peculiarities of their own natures *create* situations in which they can indulge their manias and aberrant behaviour—like Catherine Linton's willfulness resulting in her illness, or Rochester's need for control leading him to shelter Bertha Rochester under the same roof as Jane Eyre—and which, in turn, create new plot devices, and new opportunities for emotional upheaval. One of the most intriguing means by which the Brontës delineate their characters is bestowing on them various obsessions and fixations. Like the population of the Yorkshire countryside upon which these fictional characters are based, these obsessions are the products of the lifestyle; Elizabeth Gaskell, in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, observed that a "solitary life cherishes mere fancies until they become manias" (13). The Starkadders are developed along the same lines in an attempt by Gibbons to explore and understand the Brontës' tendency to

create characters of this nature. Flora's succinct analysis of her relations applies not only to the denizens of Cold Comfort Farm, but also those of Wuthering Heights, or Wildfell Hall, or Hollow's Mill:

> Persons of Aunt Ada's temperament were not fond of a tidy life. Storms were what they liked; plenty of rows, and doors being slammed, and jaws sticking out, and faces white with fury, and faces brooding in corners, faces making unnecessary fuss at breakfast, and plenty of opportunities for gorgeous emotional wallowings, and partings for ever, and misunderstandings, and interferings, and spyings, and, above all, managing and intriguing. (*CCF*, 57)

To Gibbons and readers of her kind, this sums up, accurately if simplistically, the plot devices of the Brontës' novels. The "violent types" that make Flora's stay at Cold Comfort Farm so enlivening are descendants of such martial figures as Moore and Helstone in *Shirley*, spoiling for a fight with their enemies (36), or Gilbert Markham in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, who, "impelled by some fiend" (109), strikes down one of his own friends without provocation. Likewise, Flora's observation that "the most ordinary actions became, to [persons who lived what the novelists called a rich emotional life], entangled in complicated webs of apprehension and suspicion" (*CCF*, 67) stems from Brontëan sources, like Mrs. Yorke, whose "main fault was a brooding, eternal, immitigable suspicion of all men, things, creeds, and parties...." (*S*, 148). To Gibbons, such boldly-drawn and, at times, scarcely human characters are an irresistible target for parody. Accordingly, most of the central characters from the Starkadder household—Adam, Reuben, Judith, Amos, Urk, Elfine, and Aunt Ada Doom herself—are parodies of some of the most vivid and peculiar of the characters that populate the Brontës' novels, and the specific ways in which they are similar reveal the aspects of

the Brontëan character that Gibbons finds both the most inexplicable and most entertaining.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary, powerful, and strange novels in English literature, and it achieves this distinction by virtue of its equally extraordinary characters. Even Charlotte Brontë, who was herself responsible for such remarkable figures as Jane Eyre, Rochester, and Shirley Keeldar, wondered at the exceptional quality of her sister's creations, and "shuddered under the grinding influence of natures so relentless and implacable—of spirits so lost and fallen" (*Life*, 237). Joseph, one of the minor characters, shares this nature with the tragic figures of Heathcliff and Catherine, and appears in the novel as one of the forces of destiny against which the doomed pair struggle. The depiction of this character is based on a number of significant details: his distinctive, and often incomprehensible dialect; his old age; his doom-crying; and his suspicion of and resistance to all lifestyles besides his own. Although these details, on the surface, do not appear to be terrible in and of themselves, they yet combine to form a character who is designed to be a sinister presence in the novel.

It is, of course, this discrepancy between the specific attributes that make up the character and his essence upon which Gibbons is commenting, and which determines the nature of the parody. *Cold Comfort Farm* possesses its own version of the old family servant in Adam Lambsbreath, who shares the qualities that make Joseph such a distinctive figure, and yet achieves a somewhat different effect. While all of the members of the Starkadder clan share the same dialect to some extent, the effect is heightened in Adam, whose discourse is littered with references to such mysterious

activities as "clettering," "mollocking," and "cowdling"; in deference to the fact that Cold Comfort Farm is in Sussex, the dialect is not identical to that of his Yorkshire counterpart, but the very effort on the part of the reader to render the dialogue comprehensible harks back to similar difficulties with the text of *Wuthering Heights*. Like Joseph, Adam is a hale and hearty old man, but Gibbons, to emphasize the absurdity of having a servant of advanced years, has bestowed on her creation ninety years of age. Even the pessimism and suspicion of all things unfamiliar has been passed on to Joseph's descendant, in his distrust for "that young chuck-stubbard, Mus' Richard" (*CCF*, 111), the squire of the neighbourhood, and his resistance to using his "liddle mop" to clean the dishes. The similarity of the two characters, and the rather foolish and ineffectual nature that Gibbons bestows on her own creation, address the issues that puzzle the modern reader about Joseph's role in *Wuthering Heights*: what exactly is Joseph's purpose both in the novel and in the household, and what is it about him that is supposed to be so sinister? Although it is not possible for Gibbons to answer these questions satisfactorily, she can provide her own interpretation as to what the effect of such a character would be in any other novel than one written by the Brontës or their adherents—namely, comic relief.

Hareton Earnshaw, another of the minor characters in *Wuthering Heights*, also figures as a model for one of Gibbons' own characters. His progress as a character in the novel is but lightly touched on, and yet he undergoes an extraordinary transformation which provides a strangely bright ending to the almost unrelieved darkness of most of the novel. Seen by Mr. Lockwood for brief periods at the beginning of the novel, Hareton seems almost a savage, raised by Heathcliff to

experience the same degradation that he himself underwent at the hands of Hareton's father. At the end of Ellen's narration of the tragic story of Heathcliff and Cathy, Hareton's fate of brutish ignorance and violent outbursts seems set. Upon Mr. Lockwood's return to the Heights a year later, however, the young man has been miraculously redeemed by the influence of the new woman in his life, Catherine Linton, and he has been raised, both in station and in nature, to the position of a gentleman.

The transformation of such an individual as Hareton Earnshaw is so unexpected, and yet so easily effected, that it cannot be passed over without comment by such a reader as Gibbons, and it therefore figures in the depiction of her own noble savage, Reuben Starkadder. When Flora arrives at Cold Comfort Farm, Reuben is likewise engaged in the kind of brute physical labour with which Hareton occupies himself, and likewise lacks the social graces to make himself appealing to his cousin. However, during the process of tidying up the lives of the Starkadders, Flora discovers the good heart beneath Reuben's rough exterior:

> She had grown to like Reuben in the last fortnight. He was worth whole sackfuls of the other male Starkadders. He was really very nice, and kind too, and ready to learn from anyone who would help him to improve the condition of the farm. (*CCF*, 196)

Significantly, however, Reuben's transformation is not a process by which he is changed, but by which Flora's—and the reader's—perception of him changes, suggesting how much stock Gibbons places in the idea of someone's nature undergoing a metamorphosis so radical that, as in Hareton's case, he should be unrecognizable. Nor does Gibbons find it necessary to marry her diamond in the rough off to his

cousin, as Emily Brontë does; she recognizes that the influence of a whole lifetime in the atmosphere of Cold Comfort Farm cannot be undone by the love and example of a more cultured woman, and so leaves Reuben to his own element, and the prospect of marital bliss with Mark Dolour's Nancy. The reader is left to draw his own conclusions as to what would have been best for Hareton and Catherine, but Gibbons' opinion seems clear.

Mrs. Graham, the mysterious title character of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, also exhibits characteristics that elicit a significant response from readers like Gibbons. A woman whose hopes of marital bliss have been dashed by the outrageous behaviour of her husband, Helen has removed to the environs of Wildfell Hall in an attempt to rescue herself and her young son from the evil influence of her former household. Having given up most of her family connections, her friends, and her resources in taking such a step, all of her energy becomes focused on the only tangible thing that remains to her, her son Arthur. The love she bears for Arthur is so all-consuming that it manifests itself in many different ways—her morbid fear that he will be become, at the age of five, a confirmed profligate and drunkard, her fear that he will be taken from her, and jealousy of others' influence, and her fond and lavishly-bestowed caresses:

> I would not let him go; but, taking him with me into the library, I shut the door, and, kneeling on the floor beside him, I embraced him, kissed him, wept over him with passionate fondness. (*TWH*, 311)

Gibbons' response to the improbability of Mrs. Graham's fears is to create a doting mother of her own in the figure of Judith Starkadder, upon whose magnificent shoulders rests the weight of an obsessive love for her own son, Seth. Judith's

marriage, like Helen's, is an unhappy one, though the brutishness of her husband is of a considerably different nature, and she has therefore lavished all of her affection on her child. Judith's behaviour is equally excessive: she watches him constantly, earning rebukes from her husband for her fixation (*CCF*, 172); she surrounds herself with reminders of him, including the two hundred pictures of him that decorate her room; and she betrays her jealousy of the other women in Seth's life in emotional outbursts which she cannot seem to control:

> "Who were you with last night? Moll at the mill or Violet at the vicarage? Or Ivy, perhaps, at the ironmongery? Seth—my son..." Her deep, dry voice quivered, but she whipped it back, and her next words flew out at him like a lash. "Do you want to break my heart?" (*CCF*, 39)

To enhance the humour of her exploration of excessive maternal love, Gibbons' own version of the doting mother type has a son who gives her considerably more to worry about than Mrs. Graham's gentle and well-behaved Arthur, thereby rendering Helen's worries even more disproportionate.

This obsessive fixation on a cherished idea also characterizes one of Charlotte Brontë's most singular characters—St. John Rivers, Jane Eyre's long-lost cousin. In this instance, the mania is for religion, for St. John is dedicated to saving the miserable sinners of the world. An extraordinarily handsome, clever, and good man, St. John figures in *Jane Eyre* as something of a hero, although he is not able to sway Jane herself, whose heart is already fixed on Rochester; his mania is intended both to elevate him as a character, and to provide a flaw in his character that will keep him from being too attractive to Jane. His ambition is tremendous, but he is rendered noble by his willingness to channel that ambition into such a worthy pursuit:

> "After a season of darkness and struggling, light broke and relief fell: my cramped existence all at once spread out to a plain without bounds—my powers heard a call from heaven to rise, gather full strength, spread their wings and mount beyond ken. God had an errand for me; to bear which afar, to deliver it well, skill and strength, courage and eloquence, the best qualifications of soldier, statesman and orator, were all needed: for these all centre in the good missionary. A missionary I resolved to be." (*JE*, 366)

The process of following his mania to its logical extreme exalts him above mortal men, and for a few uncomfortable pages, the halo almost becomes visible.

St. John's passionate devotion to his calling, however, is so alien to modern sensibilities that it, like the other manias encountered in the Brontës' novels, must be called into question by Gibbons. To that end, *Cold Comfort Farm* too has its own missionary, Amos Starkadder, who provides Gibbons with a wonderful outlet for all of her skepticism about religious zeal. Like his counterpart, Amos feels that he has been called by God save the miserable sinners of the world:

> "... So I mun go where th' Lord's work calls me and spread th' Lord's word abroad in strange places. Ah, 'tes terrible to have to go, but I mun do it. I been wrestlin' and prayin' and broodin' over it, and I know th' truth at last. I mun go abroad in one o' they Ford vans, preachin' all over th' countryside. Aye, like th' Apostles of old, I have heard my call, and I mun follow it." He flung his arms wide, and stood with the firelight playing its scarlet fantasia upon his exalted face. (*CCF*, 174)

In Amos, the reader encounters all of the same feelings that plague St. John Rivers—the ambition to influence lives, the conviction of damnation for others, and the certainty of glorification for himself—but here, Gibbons has dispensed with the classic good looks and cultivated manner, and challenges the reader to find the same type of character heroic without them. Moreover, she uses the same relationship to ask the

reader whether he holds the same opinion that she does, that St. John, in all of his religious fervour and cold passion, is more than a bit repulsive.

Of all of the characters that populate the novels of the Brontë sisters, the most recognized and remembered are Heathcliff and Cathy, whose tragic and unconventional tale of love denied forms the plot of *Wuthering Heights*. Raised in the same household, and destined for each other by a strange and disturbing kinship, the relationship between these two, and their shared nature, embodies all that is most powerful and imaginative in the Brontës' mode of characterization. Heathcliff's sinister countenance and brutish ways are rendered attractive to readers with a penchant for the romantic and picturesque by his unswerving devotion; Cathy's willfulness and coquetry are mitigated by the passion of her confession of love for Heathcliff:

> "If all else perished, and *he* remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the Universe would turn to a mighty stranger. I should not seem a part of it." (*WH*, 82)

Creatures of nature, the two of them pursue their solitary, yet shared pleasures on the moors, until tragedy comes in the guise of the refined society of Thrushcross Grange, an environment which seduces Cathy away from her wonted ways, setting the stage for the miseries which follow. Stripped of its labyrinthine narrative structure, and secondary plots, *Wuthering Heights* is essentially an exploration of a relationship which has come to epitomize romantic love, disturbing and all-consuming—a love for which Heathcliff and Cathy follow each other to madness and death.

Gibbons, evidently, was not a Romantic. It cannot be denied, given the presence of *Wuthering Heights* as a symbol in her own novel, that Gibbons was moved

by the story of Heathcliff and Cathy; however, the versions of these characters and their relationship that appears in *Cold Comfort Farm* suggest that she was moved to laughter, rather than tears. Elfine, young and wild, is easily recognizable as a child of Nature, and Cathy's descendant, by her penchant for solitary rambles and distaste for convention. Her future is likewise set by a destiny over which she has no control, the forces of fate (i.e. Aunt Ada Doom) having decided on her soulmate—her cousin Urk, who represents Gibbons' interpretation of Heathcliff's character-type. As dark, sinister, and possessive as the famous anti-hero upon whom he is modeled, Urk's connection to Heathcliff is reinforced by the barbaric symbols of their shared brutish nature, the dead animals that decorate Urk's unprepossessing figure (*CCF*, 141), and litter Heathcliff's environs at Wuthering Heights (*WH*, 9). Again, the budding relationship between the two destined lovers—hilariously characterized by Urk's attempts to watch Elfine change her clothes—is disrupted by the encroachment of civilization in the person of Dick Hawk-Monitor, ably filling in Edgar Linton's side of the love-triangle, and Elfine is torn, like Cathy, from the foundations upon which her life has been built, with somewhat different results:

> Flora was pleased to see that the wild-bird-cum-dryad atmosphere which hung over Elfine like a pestilential vapour was wearing thin. She was talking quite naturally. If this was the good effect of a little ordinary feminine gossip and a little interest in her poor childish affairs, the effect of a well-cut dress and a brushed and burnished head of hair might be miraculous. (*CCF*, 127)

In Gibbons' opinion, this is the way that Cathy ought to have responded to the tender ministrations of the Lintons, thanking her lucky stars for having escaped her destiny

with Heathcliff. Upon discovering that he has been cheated of his desire to possess Elfine, Urk reacts in manner typical of his predecessor:

> There came a terrible cry from the shadows near the sink.... It was Urk—Urk lying face downward, in the beef sandwiches, with one hand pressed to his heart in dreadful agony. (*CCF*, 172-73)

Instead of taking his revenge for Elfine's betrayal out on her new husband, as Heathcliff does, by eloping with Dick's sister (the healthy Joan), Urk behaves appropriately, as the creation of an author with modern sensibilities should do, by choosing a more fitting bride in Meriam, the hired girl. Gibbons suggests that if Heathcliff and Cathy had been a bit more reasonable, they would have recognized not only that one's destiny *can* be escaped, but that it often *should*.

The final character that connects the works of the Brontës to *Cold Comfort Farm* is Bertha Rochester, the madwoman in the attic who threatens Jane Eyre's life and happiness, and whose dark, menacing presence overshadows Jane's existence at Thornfield. A woman whose marriage has been destroyed by her excesses, she remains a potent figure, controlling the household even in the midst of her madness with her uncontrollable and unpredictable fits. While there is undoubtedly something disturbing about Bertha, there is likewise something ironic and tragic in her situation which invites the reader's sympathy as it excites his revulsion. According to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Bertha is the embodiment of women's rage at their lack of power, her madness the product of the inability of reconcile the expectations of society with "the ferocious secret self" (Gilbert and Gubar, 360) that yearns for autonomy. As a plot device, she must be monstrous in order to justify Rochester's behaviour towards her; as a character, she is compelling in her own right, though only briefly sketched, a

woman whose free spirit has been confined by her situation in life, whose only means of expression is madness.

For Gibbons, such a figure can excite only affectionate mockery rather than sympathy. Cold Comfort Farm is likewise ruled over by a madwoman in the attic, the matriarch of the Starkadders, Aunt Ada Doom, whose presence is the crowning touch of melodrama and contrivance Gibbons provides to wrap up all of the absurdities she detects in the Brontës' style, in her own novel:

> So that was it. Aunt Ada Doom was mad. You would expect, by all the laws of probability, to find a mad grandmother at Cold Comfort Farm, and for once the laws of probability had not done you down and a mad grandmother there was. (*CCF*, 119)

For Gibbons, there is entirely too much madness in the Brontës' novels, not only here, but also in Cathy's self-induced fits in *Wuthering Heights*, and Arthur Huntingdon's alcoholic ravings in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Her own madwoman is, like Bertha Rochester, a prisoner in her own household, but in this case, Aunt Ada Doom's confinement is voluntary, for it is through the threat of her madness that she maintains control over her family:

> "Aye," said Reuben, " 'tes terrible. And her madness takes the form of wantin' to know everything as goes on. She has to see all the books twice a week: the milk book an' the chicken book an' the pig book and corn book. If we keeps the books back, she has an attack.... If anybody eats too much, she has an attack. 'Tes terrible."
>
> "It is indeed," agreed Flora. It struck her that Aunt Ada Doom's madness had taken the most convenient form possible. If everybody who went mad could arrange in what way it was to take them, she felt pretty sure they would all choose to be mad like Ada Doom. (*CCF*, 119)

Here, Gibbons is gently mocking not only the specific example of Bertha Rochester, but also the literary motif that requires women who try to seize power for themselves

to fall into madness, thereby rendering themselves—and their ambitions—monstrous. Instead, her own version of Bertha is not mad because of her bid for power, but because her assumed madness is a means to power itself. Gibbons questions whether it is actually necessary for Bertha to be mad for the plot of *Jane Eyre* to advance, when Gibbons' own madwoman in the attic finds much more convenient ways of ruling the roost.

While Gibbons evidently cannot resist commenting on certain elements in the Brontës' novels which clash with the sensibilities of modern readers like herself, she is also capable of perceiving these novels' importance in the canon of women's literature. In recognition of this, Gibbons eases the sting of her parody that follows by affectionately mocking not only the Brontës themselves, but also their critics. The figure of Mr. Mybug, in introducing the reader to the Brontëan elements in *Cold Comfort Farm*, is rendered ridiculous by his mannerisms and the flawed logic and inadequate basis of his theory on the authorship of *Wuthering Heights* and its companion-pieces. By both establishing and undermining the suggestion that the Brontës' works were produced by a male author, Gibbons reaffirms Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë as important members of the fellowship of female authors, a fellowship to which she also belongs—perversely enough—on the basis of her own parody of their novels.

Chapter 3 "The Most Revolting Florence Nightingale Complex": Interpretations of Gibbons' Intentions

While the internal evidence thus far examined establishes the intertextual relationship between Gibbons' parody and the works of Austen and the Brontës, and provides a kind of model for the individual connections between these novels, the purpose of this relationship is still to be addressed. Why does Gibbons want her readers to recognize these connections, to bring to her own novel the themes and details of the novels she parodies, and to re-read these novels with the new perspective that she provides? I believe that the key to answering this question is provided by Gibbons when she first introduces the reader to Flora's intentions:

> "...I am sure it would be more amusing to go and stay with some of these dire relatives. Besides, there is sure to be a lot of material I can collect for my novel; and perhaps one or two of the relations will have messes or miseries in their domestic circle which I can clear up."
>
> "You have the most revolting Florence Nightingale complex," said Mrs. Smiling.
>
> "It is not that at all, and well you know it. On the whole I dislike my fellow-beings; I find them so difficult to understand. But I have a tidy mind, and untidy lives irritate me. Also, they are uncivilized." (*CCF*, 21)

If, in the interpretation of this passage, we consider that this statement characterizes not only Flora's philosophy, but Gibbons' as well, we begin to understand that the very process of writing her parody of Austen and the Brontës has been an exercise in tidying up some of the loose ends of her own reading of these works, and an attempt to address certain aspects of her predecessors' novels that were not answered to her satisfaction in their own individual and collective literary endeavours. Specifically, Gibbons' parody provides her with a forum to ask her reader two questions to which

she supplies her own answers: what would happen if Austen and the Brontës were not restricted in their respective explorations of women's issues by the traditions of their chosen genre; and, to return to the question that I posed at the beginning of this thesis, what *would* happen if you took one of Austen's heroines and dropped her into one of the Brontës' novels?

In the novel, Austen and the Brontës have found a genre which provides a perfect model for their particular talents, and a platform for the discussion of a set of issues which were close to their hearts—namely, the position of women in society. Indeed, in the very act of writing, they were practising the empowerment of women. However, while these authors have managed to convey through their writings their views on the subject, they have been, to a certain extent, restricted by the dictates of society and the traditions of the genre itself. As a result, it has been possible for Austen and the Brontës to address the constraints which affect the members of their own sex from a negative perspective only; while they focus on what women cannot and are not allowed to do, and on the unappealing qualities of the few options that are open to them, they must disguise their critiques beneath the literary conventions to which they are expected to adhere.

In her own parody of their works, Gibbons recognizes and exposes these subversive tendencies through a comic reversal of their own characters, plots, and motifs, addressing instead what women *can* do when not circumscribed by these novelistic traditions. Gibbons' techniques give her the opportunity to comment satirically on many of the traditions which have determined the fates of female characters since the development of the modern novel. In this study, I have made the

assumption that Gibbons is not necessarily suggesting that Austen and the Brontës were wrong in their mode of exploring women's issues— the intertextual relationship does not valorize one text at the expense of the other. She does, however, make full use of the conventions of her own genre. It is the very nature of parody as a genre that liberates Gibbons from the restrictions of the novel—she is not only *permitted* to defy the expectations of traditional formats, characters, and plot devices, but is actually *expected* to do so. She is therefore able to explore the ways in which she can play with the expectations of traditional heroines and novels; by changing her genre, she can use the very comedic nature of her novel to create a fantastic environment in which she can show what a heroine not limited by reality can do, in opposition to the more serious and subversive manner adopted by Austen and the Brontës. Indeed, Gibbons' choice of epigram—"Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery" (*MP*, 420)—suggests that her own interpretation of women's issues will be conducted along very different lines than those used by her predecessors.

The details appropriated from the works of Austen and the Brontës that connect her heroine, her characters, her setting, and her plot to theirs provide Gibbons with an opportunity to play a game of "let's pretend" with her readers, engaging them in the intellectual exercise of imagining how any one of these novels might have been different—specifically in its discussion of women's issues—if unencumbered by the dictates of literary "realism." Gibbons' exploration of the possibilities inherent in the parodic form find a natural focus in the figure of Flora Poste, whom she has endowed with the ability to author herself, a luxury permitted by virtue of the parodic form. Significantly, Gibbons does not extend this speculation to suggest that the same holds

true outside of the imaginative realm of literature; her own novel is set, not in 1932, when it was written, but "in the near future" (*CCF*, 6), satirically implying that the era in which Flora, as a representative of womankind, can be in reality or in "serious" literature as effective as she is within the confines of the parodic novel has yet to arrive. However, in the context of this imaginary era, Gibbons is able to use her novel to explore anew issues that have continued to affect women from Austen's time, through that of the Brontës, to Gibbons' own era and the present.

Although the writings of Austen and those of the Brontës are separated by almost half a century, little difference exists between the options open to their respective heroines and secondary female characters with regards to their future. As is the case today, women of this era had three choices (or combinations thereof) available to them—working, remaining with their families, or marrying—yet each of these possibilities was so limited that little "choice" was actually possible. The restrictions inherent in these alternatives, as issues integral to the condition of women, naturally affected the writings of Austen and the Brontës. The intertextual relationship established between their works and her own through her casual references allows Gibbons to address some of the same issues that concerned her predecessors in a new and ironic way.

It is significant that none of the heroines from Austen's major novels is confronted with the spectre of working for a living; work as a viable alternative for women in these novels is conspicuous mainly in its absence. The exception to this rule is the character of Jane Fairfax, of *Emma*, to whom it is left to explore the horrors entailed in this type of life. In the context of Austen's era, the only appropriate type of

employment for a gentlewoman was that of governess, a position likened by Jane Fairfax with the "slave-trade" (*E*, 271), and so fraught with impressions of drudgery and servitude that even the unsympathizing Emma is moved by Jane's fate. Work, as the least palatable of possible futures for women in Austen's writings, is an option to be chosen only by those who, like Jane, do not have the luxury of relying on their family—Miss Bates and her mother already subsist on a minimal allowance, leaving little to maintain their niece—or who have not yet encountered an eligible suitor to whom they can turn for support. Indeed, the very inappropriateness of women working in any genuinely useful capacity is emphasized by the occupations that are permitted and displayed in Austen's novels, such as sewing, music, and drawing. The very suggestion that these female characters could participate in even domestic work is indignantly repudiated—in Austen's typically subversive manner—as in *Pride and Prejudice*, where Mrs. Bennet, piqued by Mr. Collins' suggestion that one of the Bennet girls was responsible for the cooking, "assured him with some asperity that... her daughters had nothing to do with the kitchen" (59).

In contrast, the possibility of working is one that is embraced by many characters in the works of the Brontës, including Agnes Grey, Lucy Snowe, Caroline Helstone, and Jane Eyre. As with Austen, the only acceptable type of employment is that of a governess, work that is explored in greater detail by Charlotte and Anne Brontë, presumably informed by their own experiences. The disadvantages and degradations of this type of employment are fully chronicled in the pages of *Agnes Grey*, *Villette*, *Shirley*, and *Jane Eyre*, yet each of the characters who considers choosing this means of establishing her future accepts the inevitability of her fate in this type of

employment, resigning herself to "a new servitude" (*JE*, 86). Part of the Brontës' critique is the fact that it seems natural for these characters to accept the unnaturalness and limitations of the forms of employment appropriate for women, and to accept that working is the only option available.

Like her predecessors, Gibbons also addresses work as a female issue, touching on the subject when Flora is first confronted with the decision of how to support herself after the deaths of her parents. This exploration of the subject ironically suggests that in the century that has passed since the works of Austen and the Brontës were published, little progress has been made in validating work as an option for women. A woman who has herself chosen this avenue, Gibbons nevertheless emphasizes the way in which society trivializes women's ability to be useful, in her summary of the types of work available to Flora:

> "What kind of work?" asked Flora, sitting upright and graceful in her chair.
>
> "Well—organizing work, like I used to do.... Do not ask me what that is, exactly, for I've forgotten. It is so long since I did any. But I am sure you could do it. Or you might do journalism. Or book-keeping. Or bee-keeping." (*CCF*, 15)

Unlike the heroines of Austen's novels, Flora does not refuse to work because it is inappropriate according to the dictates of novelistic tradition, nor does she become a victim of work, as do the Brontës' heroines, in order to depict the disadvantages and mortifications of such a situation; she simply has no interest in pursuing any of these types of employment. Instead, Flora chooses her own type of work—one which, ironically, neither Austen nor the Brontës suggested for their own heroines—she will be a *novelist*, a profession which will make good use of her skills in "writing" new

endings to the situations with which she is faced, and "revising" the lives of the people who surround her.

An alternative to work, equally unattractive but more socially acceptable, is also explored as one of the issues central to the condition of women in both the works of Austen and the Brontës, and Gibbons' own parody—that of relying on one's family, of remaining under the protection and control of one's father, or the nearest facsimile thereof. In Austen's work, family is an inescapable influence, and the source of most of the heroine's external disadvantages and internal faults. For the flawed heroines of Austen's novels, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, and Marianne Dashwood, their character defects have been the direct result of the indulgence and encouragement of their parents, whose own weaknesses are bequeathed to their daughters. Other disadvantages of family are shared by all of Austen's heroines, from the minor hardship of keeping the company of a valetudinarian father suffered by Emma, to the petty tyrannies to which Fanny Price and Anne Elliot are subjected. Moreover, family in Austen's novels is inevitably paired with mortification, as her heroines are generally outsiders even in their own households, set apart from the others by a difference in situation or nature; Elizabeth's ordeal at the Netherfield Ball is characteristic of this phenomenon:

> To Elizabeth it appeared, that had her family made an agreement to expose themselves as much as they could during the evening, it would have been impossible for them to play their parts with more spirit, or finer success. (*PP*, 91)

While "Austen admits the limits and discomforts of the paternal roof," it is significant that she still "learns to live beneath it" (Gilbert and Gubar, 121), subversively

suggesting that the mortification of family life is natural and inevitable, as a choice already made for women from a disturbingly small list of options.

For the Brontës' heroines, family is less a source of embarrassment than one of distress, and as such explains their greater willingness to abandon their relatives in favour of the drudgery of life as a governess. Family takes on a sinister cast given the examples found in *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, which focus more on the dangers of patriarchal power. Upon the death of a father who is unable to protect his daughter from the influences of evil that threaten her, Catherine Linton is introduced to her new family, a demonic parody of the concept which subjects her to degradation and despair:

> "I'm come to fetch you home; and I hope you'll be a dutiful daughter, and not encourage my son to further disobedience. I was embarrassed how to punish him, when I discovered his part in the business: he's such a cobweb, a pinch would annihilate him; but you'll see by his look that he has received his due." (*WH*, 300)

Only the death of Heathcliff, the patriarch of Wuthering Heights, allows Catherine to exercise some control over her environment. Likewise, Jane Eyre's relatives, the Reeds, furnish her with a similar idea of the disadvantages of family, providing her with the same experience of alternating neglect and abuse. Even the family that Jane discovers later in the novel, the Rivers, become a source of disquiet for the heroine; though valued and surrounded by her intellectual equals, she is still subject to patriarchal oppression in the figure of St. John Rivers, whose attempts to dominate her threaten both her freedom and her life. Only through her escape from her family does Jane recover some measure of her autonomy. As with Austen's heroines, these characters must either submit to the tyrannies of their families or lose the meagre

protection offered by familial ties, a plot development which provides a pointed commentary by the Brontës on the deficiencies of family-life as an option for women.

Unlike her counterparts in the novels of Austen and the Brontës, Gibbons' own heroine has the advantage of being able to *choose* her relatives, selecting the Starkadders from the wealth of family at her disposal. For Flora, her relatives are a resource upon which she draws when circumstances render it necessary for her to change her situation; she regards them as neither an embarrassment nor a threat, although few families in literary history exhibit more potential for being both embarrassing and threatening. When faced with the possibility of finding herself oppressed by the peculiarities of her family, she exercises her particular talent for understanding and manipulating human nature to escape from the fates of the heroines who have gone before her:

> "When I have found a relative who is willing to have me, I shall take him or her in hand, and alter his or her character and mode of living to suit my own taste." (*CCF*, 16)

When Flora encounters obstacles in her crusade to change the nature of specific family members such as Amos and Judith, rather than accepting the inevitability of their influence, or attempting to escape it, she removes the influences themselves instead, deftly excising them from her environment.

The alternatives of work and family as means for securing the heroine's future are, in the novels of Austen and the Brontës, acceptable only as temporary measures until the third option for women becomes available in the form of a marriage proposal by an eligible suitor. There is a disturbing fairy-tale quality to this literary convention, a "some-day-my-prince-will-come" mentality which renders heroines little more than

damsels-in-distress, waiting to be rescued from the twin horrors of becoming part of the governess slave-trade or submitting to the mortifications of family-life. Indeed, Austen illustrates her recognition of the disquieting nature of this expectation, and subverts the tradition of matrimony as the only option available to her female characters, by suggesting that their efficacy, according to novelistic traditions, is limited to their ability to find husbands. Charlotte Lucas' matter-of-fact assessment of matrimony holds implications for Austen's views on the subject:

> Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. —Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. (*PP*, 110-11)

In the pairing of this acknowledgment of the limitations of marriage and the technique of making matrimony the foundation of her own plots, Austen reveals how restricting and ultimately devaluing the conventions of the novel are for women. Even more unsettling is the fact that Austen—again in accordance with tradition—abandons her heroines at the point of marriage to "the slightly malevolent futurity of all happily-ever-afters" (Gilbert and Gubar, 163), as if the value of these heroines is exhausted, and their lives over once they have been married off.

For the Brontës, marriage also forms an important part of the plots of their novels, though here, as in their depiction of work and family, matrimony is both more concrete and more destructive than in Austen's works. Rather than forsaking their heroines at the point of marriage, the Brontës represent some of their heroines in that state, a depiction which shows how even this, the most ostensibly positive and

appropriate of the limited choices available to women, undermines their ability to be autonomous creatures. Catherine Earnshaw, of *Wuthering Heights*, a character who appears to be divorced from the influence of society by the wildness of her nature, is eventually bribed by the kind attentions of the Lintons into submission. Her marriage, a step which she takes both because she believes it to be expected of her, and because she believes that it will give her the power to aid Heathcliff, results only in her destruction. The degradations that Helen Graham suffers throughout *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are likewise a product of her romantic views on the subject of marriage, which lead her to believe that as a wife she will have the efficacy needed to reclaim Arthur Huntingdon from his excesses. In a less dramatic, though no less disturbing way, the title character of *Shirley* is also diminished by her marriage; once the fearless Captain Keeldar, proud to be the equal in abilities and resources of any of the men in her circle of acquaintance, Shirley becomes a shadow of her former self in her new subordinate role:

> Thus vanquished and restricted, she pined, like any other chained denizen of deserts.... [Louis] was virtually master of Fieldhead, weeks before he became so nominally: the least presumptuous, the kindest master that ever was; but with his lady absolute. She abdicated without a word or a struggle. (*S*, 637-38)

Even for Jane Eyre, who achieves a measure of autonomy through her inheritance, Charlotte Brontë suggests, according to novelistic traditions, that her heroine's future is incomplete without Rochester as her husband, even though marriage means subjecting her to servitude and tyranny, more loving but no less absolute, than that which she found in her experiences with work and family. Here, as in Austen's works, the Brontës seem to recognize the insufficiency of marriage to ensure the

happiness of their heroines, any more than work or family could do so; they too both accept and undermine the constraints of literary convention, making courtship an integral part of their novels' plots, yet leaving the impression that it is incapable of providing any real happiness.

For Flora, marriage is also one of the options available to her as she contemplates her future, but here, as with the choices of work and family, she will accept this possibility only on her own terms:

> "... when it pleases me, I shall marry."
> "Who, pray?" demanded Mrs. Smiling, rudely; she was much perturbed.
> "Someone whom I shall choose. I have definite ideas about marriage, as you know. I have always liked the sound of the phrase 'a marriage has been arranged'." (*CCF*, 16)

As with the other possibilities open to her, Flora views the institution of marriage with practicality and a touch of cynicism, seeing it not as something expected of her, but as something that she might herself find pleasant. Interestingly, Gibbons does not oppose marriage—her own heroine finds true love at the end of *Cold Comfort Farm*—but it is significant that the plot of the novel itself is not remotely connected to Flora's final fate; instead, Flora's actions are directed towards changing, for the better, the world in which she lives, and they prove that she is capable of being interesting, and active, and efficacious even when she is not engaged in one of the only endeavours allowed to women by social and literary conventions. Gibbons shows, in a reversal of the manner used by Austen and the Brontës, that it is possible to portray a woman whose sphere of influence not only *can* but *should* extend farther than bringing about her own marriage.

It is, of course, the very fact that Gibbons is parodying the works of Austen and the Brontës that makes it possible for her to address women's issues in this manner—the nature of parody requires her to undermine directly the literary conventions that her predecessors undermine obliquely. The most ironic aspect of Gibbons' role as a parodist is that it allows her to be a champion for women, righting (and writing) the wrongs perpetrated on women authors and characters alike, while her own words contradict any suggestion that this was intentional. When Flora—and by extension, Gibbons—refutes Mrs. Smiling's suggestion that she suffers from a Florence Nightingale complex, she is denying that there is any particularly noble motive behind her actions. The format that she chooses for her objections—humour, rather than invective—suggests that she is less interested in the rights of women than in those of the characters that populate her favorite novels.

In addition to being a platform for Gibbons to address the limitations of literary convention, *Cold Comfort Farm* is also Gibbons' response to the challenge implicit in Charlotte Brontë's contemptuous dismissal of Austen's works in a letter to her publisher:

> "I had not seen *Pride and Prejudice* till I read that sentence of yours, and then I got the book. And what did I find? An accurate, daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face! a carefully-fenced, highly-cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses.... [George Sand] is sagacious and profound;—Miss Austen is only shrewd and observant." (*Life*, 240)

To those of us who for whom Austen's works are beloved and well-read volumes, Brontë's suggestion that "Miss Austen... *is* sensible, real (more *real* than *true*), but she

cannot be great" (*Life*, 241), gives rise to outraged protestation and a spirited defense of one of our favorite novelists; to those of us who have studied Austen's works, it also raises the question, born of intellectual curiosity and the rich sense of humour to which these works appeal, of what Austen would make of the Brontës.

So, to pose again the question—what *does* happen when you pitch an Austenian heroine into a Brontëan novel?—the ultimate answer would appear to be Gibbons' real agenda, which is a stylistic battle of wits between Austen and the Brontës to find out which would come out on top, not so much a marriage of styles as a clash of the titans. The battle for supremacy between these two modes of expression and models for depicting reality is focused for their respective authors along the lines that we have already defined in Chapter 1 and 2: Austen is championed by Flora Poste, an incarnation of her own heroines, but with certain modern liberties and advantages, while the Brontës are represented by the forces that act against Flora, including the Starkadders and the general atmosphere of the novel. Flora defines it this way:

> If she succeeded in making Dick Hawk-Monitor propose to Elfine it would be a successful *geste* in the face of the Starkadders. It would be a triumph of the Higher Common Sense over Aunt Ada Doom. It would be a victory for Flora's philosophy of life over the subconscious life-philosophy of the Starkadders. (*CCF*, 135)

This literary war between these authors is not limited only to the issue of Elfine's fate. A number of battles are waged between Flora and her relatives' way of life, including her attempts to instill a rudimentary understanding of birth-control in Meriam, the hired girl, to get Amos to leave the farm to Reuben, and—the crux of the issue—to break Aunt Ada Doom's deathgrip on the Starkadders. In spite of Flora's determination, she often loses these battles to the sheer bloody-mindedness of her

opponents—witness, for example, her inability to get Adam to use his "liddle mop"—and there are times when the Starkadders seem so deeply entrenched in their Brontëan melodrama that she will never succeed in excavating them. Nor does Flora have any moral high ground on which to stand, which would guarantee the success of her endeavours, and make the outcome of the novel—based on traditional models—a foregone conclusion.

However, if we use Horace Walpole's aphorism that "The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel" (*Letter to the Countess of Upper Ossory*, August 16, 1776) as a model for differentiating between the styles of Austen and the Brontës, we find a clue to Gibbons' intentions. This model, though simplistic, is strangely appropriate, as Gibbons polarizes the relationship of these authors to each other by her choice of elements to incorporate into her own novel; in her "tidy" way of defining her own heroine according to Austen's logical model of characterization, she associates Austen with the thinkers of this world, while her adoption of the "untidy" and emotionally-charged elements of atmosphere found in the novels of the Brontës strenuously suggests that she aligns them with the feelers. The fact then that *Cold Comfort Farm* itself is a comedy suggests to the reader from the beginning that the odds are in favour of Austen. Gibbons, in her choice of parody as her genre, allies herself with thinkers such as Austen; indeed, the very care and attention to detail with which she incorporates elements of her predecessors' works into her own tribute to them shows how much of an intellectual exercise the writing of this novel must have been. Of course, given Gibbons' predilection for obfuscation, the solution cannot be that simple; paradoxically, *Cold Comfort Farm* is not only a manifestation of Gibbons'

comedic and intellectual biases, but also a very spirited—and *feeling*—defense of Austen's novels.

Conclusion "Mr. Mybug": The Irony of Scholarship

Over the past eighty pages, I have gone through the process of identifying the intertextual references imbedded in *Cold Comfort Farm*, and suggested that this has been a deliberate technique adopted by Gibbons. I have imposed a model on these references by defining Flora Poste in terms of Austen's conventions for the characterization of heroines, and defining the other elements of the novel according to the elements found in the Brontës' novels. And finally, I have attempted to determine what these intertextual relationships are intended to say on the subjects of politics and literature. At the conclusion of my exploration of Gibbons' ironic treatment of her many influences and inspirations, I am faced with the final irony of my scholarly endeavour, one which Gibbons herself introduces in her parody. In planting such intertextual references as have been the basis for this thesis, Gibbons invites the kind of speculation that she so delightfully and pointedly mocks in the figure of Mr. Mybug, with his psychological study of Branwell Brontë's three apocryphal letters to Mrs. Prunty. I am left with the uncomfortable feeling that I, like Mr. Mybug, have left myself open to ridicule, for might not my own sense of the significance of these references to Austen and the Brontës be regarded as equally absurd? If I have done so, I am at least convinced that Gibbons would enjoy the irony of having inspired my own Mr. Mybug-like speculations.

Works Cited and Consulted

Austen, Jane. *Emma* (1816). Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

---. *Jane Austen's Letters to her sister Cassandra and others* (1932). Ed. R.W. Chapman. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.

---. *Mansfield Park* (1814). Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

---. *Northanger Abbey* (1818), *Lady Susan* (1871), *The Watsons, and Sanditon.* Ed. Terry Castle. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

---. *Persuasion* (1818). Ed. John Davie. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

---. *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

---. *Sense and Sensibility* ((1811). Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Austen-Leigh, J.E. *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. London: Richard Bentley, 1870.

Brontë, Anne. *Agnes Grey* (1847). Ed. Hilda Marsden. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

---. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). Ed. Herbert Rosengarten. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre* (1847). Ed. Margaret Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

---. *Shirley* (1849). Ed. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

---. *Villette* (1853). Ed. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Ed. Patsy Stoneman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms. Ed. Chris Baldick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Drabble, Margaret. *A Writer's Britain*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1979.

The Feminist Companion to Literature in English : Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present. Ed. Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy. London : Batsford, 1990.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1946.

Gibbons, Stella. *The Bachelor*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948.

---. *Bassett*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1934.

---. *The Charmers*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966.

---. *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). London: Penguin Books, 1994.

---. *Fort of the Bear*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1953.

---. *A Pink Front Door*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960.

---. *The Rich House*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1947.

---. *Starlight*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). Ed. Scott Elledge. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979.

Hebel, Udo J. *Intertextuality, Allusion, and Quotation: An International Bibliography of Critical Studies*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.

Holub, Robert C. *Reception Theory*. London: Routledge, 1989.

Hopkins, R. Thurston. *Sheila Kaye-Smith and the Weald Country*. London: Cecil Palmer, 1925.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody*. New York: Methuen, 1985.

Kaye-Smith, Sheila. *Joanna Godden* (1921). London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1921.

---. *Sussex Gorse* (1916). Cassell and Company Ltd., 1923.

Kristeva, Julia. "Intertextuality and Literary Interpretation." Interview with Margaret Waller. *Julia Kristeva interviews*. Ed. Ross Mitchell Guberman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

---. "Word, Dialogue and Novel." *The Kristeva Reader*. Trans. Seán Hand. Ed. Toril Moi. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

Lawrence, D.H. *The Rainbow* (1915). Ed. Mark Kinkead-Weekes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

---. *Women in Love* (1921). Ed. David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Morgan, Thaïs E. "Is There an Intertext in this Text?: Literary and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intertextuality." *American Journal of Semiotics*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1985): 1-40.

The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. Ed. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Webb, Mary. *Gone to Earth* (1917). London: Jonathon Cape, 1930.

---. *Precious Bane* (1924). London: Jonathon Cape, 1931.